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### Accutane

Accutane (isotretinoin) is a medication used to treat the more severe forms of acne. It may also be used for moderate forms of acne that have not responded to the usual treatments, such as oral antibiotics and topical creams. Accutane is chemically related to Vitamin A, and works mainly by decreasing the amount of oil (sebum) that is produced by your skin. It also acts to reduce inflammation and decrease the amount of bacteria present. It has been found to be the most effective treatment for acne, but because the side effects can be serious, we only prescribe this medication when we believe it is indicated.

Keep this handout available, because it explains how to take Accutane, what you can do to minimize the side effects, and important information about what you need to avoid even after finishing Accutane. You will want to refer to it frequently.

### The most common side effects from taking Accutane are:

**Dry lips and skin:** There are a few ways to treat this. These include taking 400-800 I.U. of Vitamin E every day with food, applying Aquaphor Healing Ointment to your lips, and moisturizing your skin at least twice a day. Avoid using soap. Instead, try using a liquid moisturizing cleanser such as Cetaphil or Aquanil. This will get you clean without drying or irritating your skin. If you prefer a solid bar of soap, unscented Dove would be a good choice. Cetaphil is also available in a bar form. Drinking six extra glasses of water a day is helpful in combating dryness. If your lips become swollen, tender, or cracked, please let us know. This may be caused by bacteria or yeast and can be treated with a prescription cream.

**Nosebleeds:** Having a humidifier in the house is helpful, especially during the dry winter months. Also, applying a thin coat of Vaseline to the inside of your nose several times daily will moisturize the skin and lessen the chance of nosebleeds. You can do this either with a Q-Tip or your finger. Nasal moisturizing sprays, such as Ocean Nasal Spray, are available without prescription.

**Dry eyes:** Several companies market sterile eye drops known as “natural” or “artificial” tears, which may be helpful. We recommend Celluvisc lubricating eye drops in 0.5% and 1.0% concentrations. The 1.0% is somewhat more effective. We also suggest Genteal eye gel to be applied at bedtime. These products are available without a prescription. Dryness can be particularly challenging to contact lens wearers. If your eyes become uncomfortably dry, you might switch to wearing glasses during the course of your treatment. If dryness becomes severe, please stop taking the Accutane and call our office.

**Sun sensitivity:** Accutane will make your skin more sensitive to the sun. Please use a sunscreen with an SPF of 30 or greater and avoid direct sun, particularly during the peak hours of 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. While in the sun, wear a hat with a brim to protect your face, and consider a lightweight long-sleeved shirt and pants. Please remember that most sunscreens take 30 minutes to be fully absorbed and begin working, so try to put your sunscreen on about ½ hour before going outdoors.

**Headaches:** If minor, take Tylenol or ibuprofen. Children and teenagers should not use aspirin. *If headaches become severe or persistent, stop taking the Accutane and contact our office right away.*

**Elevated lipids:** It is common for lipid (cholesterol and triglyceride) levels in the blood to increase during treatment. In most cases the increase is minor and will often reverse itself after a few months. Your lipid levels will be checked prior to beginning treatment, and then at regular intervals. In the uncommon situation where lipid levels continue to rise, we would lower your dosage or consider stopping the Accutane. If your lipid levels are elevated, we recommend eating a diet that is low in saturated fats. We suggest avoiding or limiting your intake of fried foods, ice cream, potato chips, and “junk” food. Avoid fatty meats such as bacon and sausage. Trim the fat from red meat, and trim the skin from chicken and turkey.

**Joint or muscle pain:** Approximately 16% of patients treated with Accutane in a clinical trial developed joint or muscle pain. If mild, you may take Tylenol or ibuprofen if needed. If the discomfort is severe, please contact our office. It is also recommended that patients avoid more than two hours of strenuous exercise daily. Transient pain in the chest has also been reported, though less frequently. These symptoms generally clear rapidly after discontinuing the Accutane, but in some cases may persist.

**Elevation of liver enzymes:** Occasionally Accutane may cause mild inflammation of the liver, which would be evidenced by an increase in liver enzymes measured in your blood test. As with lipids, the liver enzymes will be measured on a regular basis.

**Thinning hair:** Approximately 10% of patients observe thinning hair, but it generally returns to normal after treatment.

***Please Note: It is extremely important that you do not take any supplements that contain Vitamin A while you are taking Accutane. This may exacerbate any side effects you may be experiencing and can be potentially dangerous.***

### **Uncommon side effects:**

**Mood changes:** There have been some reports in the medical literature of mood changes caused by taking Accutane. Very rarely, significant depression may occur. It is not yet certain whether the incidence of depression in patients taking Accutane is any greater than that in the general population. Furthermore, mild depression in patients with severe acne is considered a normal response to such a condition and tends to improve, as one’s complexion improves. Nevertheless, if you are experiencing mood changes or feelings of depression please contact our office.

**Changes in vision:** While rare, it is possible that Accutane may cause diminished night vision. Dry eyes may cause increased sensitivity to bright light. Should you notice any change in vision, either during the day or at night, please call our office.

**Persistent or severe headaches, nausea, blurry vision, or abdominal pain:** If you suffer from any of the above side effects, please stop taking Accutane and call our office right away.

*\*\* For more information on these and other rare side effects, please call us or refer to the patient package insert provided by the manufacturer.*

*Please note that Accutane may cause acne to worsen at the beginning of treatment. In most cases we can minimize or avoid this problem by starting with a low dose of medication. We will gradually increase the dose until the full appropriate dose is reached.*

### **Pregnancy:**

If you are female, please remember that Accutane taken during pregnancy or 1-2 months prior to becoming pregnant will result in birth defects. Two forms of appropriate birth control or abstinence must be used one month before, during and for two months after completing Accutane treatment, unless you have had a hysterectomy. There have been reports of pregnancy in patients who had used only a birth control pill. These issues regarding Accutane are more fully described in the brochure provided by the manufacturer. All females of childbearing age must sign an informed consent provided by the manufacturer before beginning treatment. If you would like additional birth control counseling, we would be happy to refer you.

## **Getting ready, taking the Accutane, and visiting us**

### **Prescriptions and Laboratory Testing:**

After you have reviewed Accutane with Dr. Cohen and his staff and are comfortable with its use and potential side effects, we will give you two laboratory prescriptions. The first prescription is for baseline blood and urine tests and will include a pregnancy test for women of childbearing age.

The second prescription is a “standing order” for the specific tests needed to monitor lipid levels and liver enzymes. These tests are usually done monthly; a “standing order” allows your laboratory to perform the tests without requiring you to bring them a new prescription each month.

Go to a lab of your choice and have the first tests done. These and all subsequent tests are best done first thing in the morning, before you eat (**a fasting specimen**). This gives us the most accurate reading of your lipid levels. Please ask the lab to fax us the results.

### **Taking the medication:**

As soon as we receive the results, we will contact you. If the results are normal, we will give you a prescription for Accutane. Please note that Accutane is a brand name for the drug isotretinoin. It is also now available in generic form under the names of Amnesteem, Sotret and Claravis. As a result of new FDA guidelines, prescriptions for isotretinoin can no longer be called to a pharmacy. Your pharmacy requires a hard copy of the prescription. You may pick up the prescription at our office, or we can mail it to you. \*\* Prescriptions must be filled within 7 days of the date they are written, or the pharmacy will not accept them. To avoid any delay or interruption in treatment, please make sure to fill your prescription within a few days of obtaining it. When you receive your prescription, it is a good idea to schedule your next appointment, which should be three weeks after you begin taking the medication. Women should begin taking Accutane on the second or third day of their period.

Pick up your Accutane and begin taking the prescribed dosage. For most new patients this is 20mg (one capsule) once a day for the first 7 – 10 days, and then 40mg (two capsules) once a day until you return to our office. The specific dosage will be tailored individually, according to your weight and the severity of your acne. **Helpful hint:** more of the Accutane is absorbed when you take it with food.

When you start taking the Accutane, you should stop taking any other acne medications at that time, particularly any oral antibiotics in the tetracycline family (tetracycline, doxycycline, and minocycline). If you are taking any of the three antibiotics mentioned above, we recommend stopping them for 3 days before you start taking Accutane. If you have any concerns regarding stopping your medication, please discuss them with Dr. Cohen.

*Do not share the Accutane with your friends or family.* Anyone who takes Accutane requires careful physician supervision, as well as regular blood tests. No one should take this medication without regularly seeing a doctor.

### **Visiting our office:**

1. Please arrange to have your blood drawn at least four business days before each appointment so that the results will arrive by the day of your visit. These tests help us evaluate how well your body is tolerating the Accutane and are an integral part of adjusting your dosage. **If the tests have not been done in advance, we may need to reschedule your visit.**
2. At each appointment we will give you a new prescription for Accutane. Please make your appointment for a return visit at that time. After the first visit you should come back once a month until you finish your course of treatment, which is typically 5–6 months.
3. If you need to get referrals for your visits, please let your primary care doctor know that you will most likely be making a total of 6 or 7 visits. Often, they give 3 visits for a referral, but sometimes they will give more depending upon the treatment.

## **You're done! Congratulations! But wait! There's more.**

### **Things we recommend you avoid while taking Accutane and for a few months after completion of treatment:**

- We have found that your skin can become fragile from this medication. We recommend that for the duration of your treatment, and for at least six months afterward, you avoid any waxing procedures. If you pluck or shave, do so carefully and discontinue doing so if your skin becomes irritated. Other cosmetic procedures such as scar revision, peels, dermabrasion, microdermabrasion and laser treatment should be avoided completely during treatment and for six months to a year after treatment is completed.
- Avoid drinking alcohol. Accutane can affect the liver and drinking alcohol can put an even greater strain on your liver.
- Do not donate blood while you are taking Accutane or for at least one month after you stop the medication. This is to prevent a woman who may be pregnant from receiving donated blood that may contain Accutane.
- Your skin will continue to be more sensitive to the sun for some time, possibly up to a year. Please use sunscreen and avoid prolonged sun exposure.

### **Frequently Asked Questions:**

**Q:** With all the side effects related to Accutane, why do people use it?

**A:** For approximately 40% of patients, and particularly for teenagers, Accutane may result in a complete cure. For most other patients, the improvement is still quite dramatic and may include total clearing; however, the acne may recur months or years later, though usually in a milder form. Occasionally, recurrent or persistent acne may require more than one course of Accutane.

Most patients believe that the discomfort and risks associated with the potential side effects are well worth it. In fact, we maintain a list of satisfied patients (and parents!) who would be glad to speak with you. If you are interested in speaking with any of them, please ask us for their phone number(s).

**Q:** What if I run out of medication before my next appointment?

**A:** The best results are obtained by taking Accutane without interruption. If you run out of medication before your scheduled appointment, please call us – preferably at least a few days before you run out – and we will give you a prescription for enough medication to last you until your next appointment.

**Q:** I think I may be having a side effect, but I am not sure. What should I do?

A: If you are not sure, then the reaction you are experiencing is probably rather mild. If the recommendations given for helping reduce side effects do not apply to your particular problem, give us a call and we'll be happy to discuss it with you. The one exception to this is if you think you are having mood changes or depression. If you are feeling unusually irritable, angry, or agitated, or have feelings of sadness or depression, or if others are asking you if you are depressed, please call us immediately.

**Please note:**

*The list of potential side effects in this handout is extensive but does not list all possible side effects. For a complete list of reported side effects please refer to the package insert included with your medication or ask your pharmacist for a complete list. To date, millions (that's correct, millions) of patients in many countries have safely used Accutane for more than 20 years, but unanticipated side effects are always a possibility. If you have any questions while on the medication, please do not hesitate to call us.*