

What Price Beauty?

The acne drug Accutane promises women flawless skin. But it comes with serious risks.

PHOTO BY RICHARD PIERCE

What with all manner of creams and concoctions on the market—and with Botox, chemical peels and laser resurfacing readily available at your plastic surgeon's office—it's not surprising that many women are willing to spend any amount in pursuit of the perfect complexion.

But when it comes to the acne drug Accutane, they may be paying too high a price.

The powerful drug has been associated with side effects ranging from depression to severe birth defects, but the newest cause for concern is that many women and men are probably taking it unnecessarily. The FDA approved Accutane in 1982 for the treatment of severe cystic acne, a condition the American Association of Dermatologists estimates affects one million Americans—a startlingly low figure considering that roughly double that number are now using the drug.

Accutane, it seems, has become as ubiquitous as Prozac. One New York fashion editor recently got a prescription to treat skin that could hardly be described as problematic, let alone zit-riddled. Now a convert, she insists. "My skin has never looked better."

Indeed, in the minds of countless patients and their doctors, Accutane is a miracle. "It's a wonder drug," says Manhattan dermatologist Deborah Jaliman MD. "It has helped so many people and changed their lives." But, she admits, "Accutane is so common now that it is being abused. People with a few pimples want to be on Accutane, which is totally inappropriate—it's like shooting a flea with a machine gun."

A spokeswoman for Roche Laboratories, which produces the drug, says ultimately it's up to doctors to prescribe Accutane responsibly. "Accutane is a line of treatment for when all else fails," she says. "It is for severe nodular acne that cannot be successfully treated by any other method."

Accutane is derived from vitamin A molecules and is unique because, unlike antibiotic, topical and hormonal treatments, it can permanently cure many cases of acne. The drug works by damaging the skin's oil glands, thereby reducing the amount of sebum produced. While this process can lead to chapped lips, nosebleeds and dry skin, dermatologists say it will not cause permanently dry skin (associated with lack of water) or premature aging of the skin (associated with lack of collagen).

The possible risks, though, are far more serious than a few dry patches or wrinkles. Reports of birth defects linked to Accutane first reached the FDA in the 1980s, and it was soon established that the drug could produce major deformities in fetuses. But despite Roche's warnings—including pamphlets accompanying prescriptions and the strong recommendation that women of childbearing age use two forms of contraception while taking it—there have been an estimated 13,000

Accutane-related abortions and more than 1,000 Accutane-related birth defects, according to an FDA report. The effect of the drug on male patients is not known, but men are advised not to father children within six months of treatment.

Other potential side effects reported by some patients taking the drug include headaches, loss of night vision, severe depression, psychosis, elevated cholesterol, inflammatory bowel disease and delayed wound healing. Some doctors recommend abstaining from alcohol (Accutane is toxic to the liver) and even bikini waxing (increased skin sensitivity could lead to burns).

In the eyes of the medical profession, however, Accutane has a good safety profile. "I've never seen a case of depression caused by Accutane," says Jaliman. "What I have seen is kids depressed by acne—kids who sit with their heads slumped down, who won't make eye contact and who cover their face with their hair. That's awful."

Dermatologist Steven Victor MD, meanwhile, has so much confidence in Accutane that he prescribed it for his own children. And the FDA's dermatological advisory committee voted to keep the drug on the market, deciding that for patients with severe acne, the benefits outweigh the risks.

Indeed, in this age of uncompromising aesthetic standards, the risks are acceptable to many, especially since alternative treatments are not nearly as effective. Antibiotics such as Minocin and Tetracycline have been used for years to treat acne, but doctors say the benefits are temporary, and long-term use can create antibiotic-resistant organisms and weaken the immune system. The other option is the birth-control pill, but while the FDA has recently approved the use of Orthotrieyline to treat acne, some doctors are skeptical about its effectiveness.

Despite the dangers, use of Accutane is sure to grow. Next year, Roche's patent expires, and other pharmaceutical companies' versions of the drug are expected to remove one of the last remaining barriers to unblemished skin: the high price of \$170 per course of treatment.

—RACHEL MARLOWE

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