

# Acitretin for the management of skin conditions

**This information sheet has been given to you to help answer some of the questions you may have about using acitretin to treat your skin condition. If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to the doctor or nurse caring for you.**

## What is acitretin?

Acitretin is a medicine which belongs to a group of medicines called retinoids. It is used to treat a variety of skin conditions in which the skin has become thick and scaly (such as severe psoriasis). It works by slowing down rapidly-dividing skin cells and calming the inflammation.

Before starting treatment it is important that you read the manufacturer's leaflet that comes with the medicine.

## How do I take the medicine?

Acitretin capsules should be swallowed whole (not chewed) and taken once a day either with food or milk. Your doctor will discuss your treatment course with you – the dose you take will vary according to your individual circumstances, the condition being treated and your response once you have started therapy. Acitretin is normally used for a maximum of six months, however a longer treatment course may be required. Acitretin is a specialist treatment so is only available on prescription from your dermatologist (skin doctor).

## Are there any side effects?

As with all medicines, there are some side effects to using acitretin. Most of the side effects are related to the dose you are taking and are reversible when the dose is reduced or stopped. The most common adverse effects that can occur include:

- dry lips, skin and eyes – this can usually be relieved through the use of moisturisers, lubricating eye drops and lip salves
- skin thinning
- headaches
- dry, irritated, runny nose or nose bleeds
- reversible hair loss and hair thinning
- increased sensitivity of your skin to sunlight, which may cause your skin to burn more easily. You should therefore avoid excessive exposure to sunlight and avoid all use of sun lamps and sun beds. If you are going to be exposed to direct sunlight, ensure you wear sunscreen with a high factor (at least SPF 15).

There are also some more serious side effects associated with acitretin, but these are rare. If at any time you develop any of the following side effects, please inform your GP or specialist doctor or nurse immediately:

- severe headaches, vomiting, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, and visual disturbances (including blurred vision, reduced night vision, sudden loss of vision or decreased vision)
- aches and pains in your muscles, bones or joints. This may mean you have extra growth on the surface of your bones. This can happen if you take acitretin over a long period of time.

## **Is there anything else I need to know?**

- If you have diabetes then you will need to monitor your blood sugar levels more frequently when starting acitretin, as it can affect glucose (blood sugar) control.
- If you have raised cholesterol or are at a high risk of this (if you are overweight or have diabetes for example) you will need to have your blood levels of cholesterol (as well as other fats) monitored more frequently as these can become raised when taking acitretin.
- Sometimes acitretin can lead to inflammation of the liver, and we will therefore monitor your liver function using blood tests.
- Try to avoid drinking alcohol or keep this to a minimum. Alcohol can increase the amount of time acitretin stays in your body.
- You must not give blood while you are taking acitretin or for one year after you stop taking it. Acitretin stays in the blood for a long period of time and could potentially be harmful to others if they are given blood transfusions containing acitretin.
- You will be asked to attend for regular blood tests to ensure that it is safe for you to continue taking acitretin. It is extremely important that you attend these appointments.

As with all medicines, ensure that your treatment is kept in the original container, in a locked cupboard (at room temperature) out of the reach of children and animals.

## **Can I take other medicines while I am on acitretin?**

Acitretin is known to interact with a number of different medicines. It is therefore very important that you let your doctor, clinical nurse specialist or pharmacist know if you are taking or thinking about taking any medicines or supplements (including herbal and vitamin tablets) either on a regular or occasional basis. Medicines of particular concern include:

- methotrexate (which you could also be using for psoriasis)
- tetracycline antibiotics (such as tetracycline, doxycycline and minocycline)
- progestogen-only oral contraceptives
- phenytoin (for epilepsy)
- medicines or supplements containing vitamin A. As acitretin is a derivative of vitamin A, you should avoid taking other medicines or supplements that contain high levels of vitamin A (more than 500iu per day).
- other retinoid medicines (such as isotretinoin).

## **Can I take acitretin if I am pregnant, breastfeeding or wishing to become pregnant?**

Acitretin can cause harm to unborn babies. The following instructions should therefore be followed by all women of child-bearing age, even if you have previously experienced fertility problems:

- Do not take acitretin if you are pregnant, think you may be pregnant, are planning a pregnancy, or are breastfeeding. Let your doctor know immediately if you are or think you may be pregnant.
- You must use an effective form of contraception (preferably two methods) for at least one month before you start acitretin. This should be continued throughout your treatment and for at least two years after you stop taking it.
- You will need to have a pregnancy test about two weeks before starting treatment with acitretin, and this must be negative. Following a negative pregnancy test, treatment should be started on the second or third day of your next period.
- You will be asked to have regular pregnancy tests (monthly, where possible) for the duration of your treatment with acitretin.

If you are a female patient thinking about becoming pregnant, please speak to your doctor. Alternative treatments are available which may be more appropriate for you.

## Where can I get a repeat prescription?

If appropriate, you will be given a prescription for a further supply of acitretin when you attend the specialist clinic. Please take this prescription to the outpatient pharmacy. Your dermatologist will ensure that you are given enough supply to last between appointments. If you do run out, you should contact your specialist team at the hospital.

## What should I do if I forget to take the medicine?

It is important to take your medication as directed by your doctor. If you forget, as long as you remember 8–12 hours before the next dose is due, you should take the missed dose as normal. Do not take a double dose (two doses at the same time) to make up for a forgotten dose.

## Contact us

If you have any further questions or concerns about acitretin, please contact your doctor or our pharmacy medicines helpline (contact details are provided below).

## Further sources of information

### Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline.

t: 020 7188 8748 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday

### Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS)

To make comments or raise concerns about the Trust's services, please contact PALS. Ask a member of staff to direct you to the PALS office or:

t: 020 7188 8801 at St Thomas'    t: 020 7188 8803 at Guy's    e: pals@gstt.nhs.uk

### Language Support Services

If you need an interpreter or information about your care in a different language or format, please get in touch using the following contact details.

t: 020 7188 8815    fax: 020 7188 5953

**Leaflet number: 2753/VER2**

Date published: May 2014

Review date: May 2017