

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 taken orally (by mouth) 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.

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
- 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 factor 15).

There are also some less common side effects. 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, 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?

- Diabetic patients will need to monitor their 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 obese or have diabetes) you will need to have your cholesterol levels monitored more frequently, as taking acitretin can affect levels of cholesterol in the blood.
- Try to avoid drinking alcohol or keep this to a minimum. Alcohol can increase the amount of time the 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.

As with all medicines, ensure that your treatment is kept 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. Please discuss with your doctor 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)
- anticoagulant (blood “thinning”) medication (such as warfarin)
- 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).

Can I take acitretin if I am pregnant, breast feeding 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 or are breast feeding. Let your doctor know immediately if you are or think you may be pregnant.
- You must use an effective form of contraception for at least one month before you start acitretin. This should be continued throughout your treatment and for at least three years after you stop taking it.

- You will need to have a pregnancy test about two weeks before starting treatment with acitretin, which 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 doctor will ensure that you are given enough supply to last between appointments. If you do run out, you should contact your doctor.

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

For information about any medicines that you have been prescribed at Guy's and St Thomas' hospitals, you can 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

Knowledge & Information Centre (KIC)

For more information about health conditions, support groups and local services, or to search the internet and send emails, please visit the KIC on the Ground Floor, North Wing, St Thomas' Hospital.

t: 020 7188 3416

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

NHS Direct

Offers health information and advice from specially trained nurses over the phone 24 hours a day.

t: 0845 4647 **w:** www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

NHS Choices

Provides online information and guidance on all aspects of health and healthcare, to help you make choices about your health.

w: www.nhs.uk

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