

Anabolic steroid misuse

Anabolic steroids are prescription-only medicines.

They are sometimes taken without medical advice to increase muscle mass and improve athletic performance.

If anabolic steroids are used in this way, they can cause serious side effects and addiction.

Anabolic steroids are manufactured drugs that copy the effects of the male hormone testosterone. They have limited medical uses and are not the same as corticosteroids, a different type of steroid drug that's more commonly prescribed.

Get help if you're addicted

Your GP will help you to get treatment for addiction.

Contact your GP if:

- you think you're addicted to anabolic steroids

 [Find a GP](#)

 [Find a GP out of hours](#)

Your GP may refer you to a drugs counsellor. They'll discuss your addiction and help you safely stop taking anabolic steroids.

Medical use of anabolic steroids

Anabolic steroids have limited medical uses.

They are sometimes prescribed to treat:

- hormone deficiencies
- diseases that result in loss of lean muscle mass, such as cancer and AIDS

Anabolic steroids and the law

Anabolic steroids are only legally available when prescribed by a doctor.

It is illegal to sell them or supply them. This includes giving them to friends.

You could be fined up to €2,000 or put in jail.

Most sport organisations ban and test for anabolic steroid use.

Why people misuse anabolic steroids

Anabolic steroids can be used as performance-enhancing drugs.

They increase muscle and decrease fat but also cause many unpleasant side effects. Some athletes and bodybuilders take them to improve their physical performance.

People may also misuse these drugs for other reasons. For example, some people take them if they have body dysmorphic disorder - a mental health condition where you worry a lot about how you look.

Other people believe taking anabolic steroids will help them become fit and healthy.

This is not true. Taking anabolic steroids is dangerous.

How anabolic steroids are taken

Anabolic steroids are usually injected into the muscle or taken by mouth as tablets.

They also come as creams or gels that are put on the skin.

People who misuse anabolic steroids might:

- take the drugs for a while, stop for a rest then start again - this is known as 'cycling'
- take more than 1 type of anabolic steroid at a time - this is known as 'stacking'
- do a combination of both stacking and cycling known as 'pyramiding'

There is no evidence that these methods reduce the side effects from taking anabolic steroids.

Side effects of anabolic steroids

Taking anabolic steroids can lead to physical and mental changes in both men and women.

They can also cause serious medical conditions, such as heart attack, stroke and blood clots. These can be fatal.

Physical side effects

Effects of anabolic steroids in men can include:

- reduced sperm count
- [infertility](#)
- shrunken testicles
- [erectile dysfunction](#)
- baldness
- breast development
- increased risk of prostate cancer
- severe [acne](#)
- stomach pain

In women, anabolic steroids can cause:

- growth of facial and body hair
- decreased breast size
- a swollen clitoris
- a deeper voice
- an increased sex drive
- [period problems](#)
- [hair loss](#)
- severe [acne](#)

Men and women who take anabolic steroids can develop medical conditions, some of which can be fatal.

Medical conditions include:

- [heart attack](#)
- [stroke](#)
- liver or kidney problems or failure
- [high blood pressure \(hypertension\)](#)
- [blood clots](#)
- fluid retention
- [high cholesterol](#)

Psychological side effects

Misusing anabolic steroids can cause mental or emotional effects, including:

- aggressive behaviour
- mood swings
- paranoia
- manic behaviour
- hallucinations and delusions

Stunted growth in teenagers

Anabolic steroids speed up bone growth.

This can cause premature ageing of bones in teenagers who are still growing and restrict their growth.

Risks from sharing needles

As anabolic steroids are often injected, there are risks that come with sharing needles.

These are the same risks as recreational drug use and include:

- damage to veins leading to ulcers or gangrene
- [hepatitis B infection](#)
- [hepatitis C infection](#)
- HIV transmission

Your local needle exchange scheme can help reduce the risks that come with sharing injecting equipment.

They can:

- provide syringes and other sterile equipment
- help you dispose of used equipment safely

They can also offer confidential guidance and advice.

Find a local needle exchange programme on [drugs.ie](https://www.drugs.ie).

Addiction

Anabolic steroids are addictive.

This means you can crave the drug and need more to get the same effect. You can have withdrawal symptoms if you suddenly stop taking them.

A person who is addicted to anabolic steroids will want to keep using them despite having unpleasant side effects.

When GPs prescribe steroid medicine, they always advise coming off the medicine slowly by gradually reducing the dose.

Stopping anabolic steroids suddenly can result in withdrawal symptoms that include:

- [depression](#) and apathy
- [anxiety](#)
- difficulty concentrating
- [insomnia](#)

- [anorexia](#)
- lower sex drive
- extreme tiredness (fatigue)
- headaches
- muscle and joint pain

Page last reviewed: 9 June 2024

Next review due: 9 June 2027

This project has received funding from the Government of Ireland's Sláintecare Integration Fund 2019 under Grant Agreement Number 123.

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