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THE INTERDISCIPLINARY IMPACT OF ISOTRETINOIN THERAPY ON ACNE VULGARIS: A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF ADVERSE EFFECTS AND MONITORING PROTOCOLS

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ABSTRACT

Acne vulgaris is a prevalent chronic inflammatory disease that carries a profound psychosocial burden, often requiring systemic treatment with isotretinoin for severe, nodulocystic, or recalcitrant cases. As the only therapeutic agent targeting all major pathogenic factors, isotretinoin induces sebocyte apoptosis, drastically reducing sebum production by up to 90% and altering the follicular microenvironment. However, this widespread cellular impact results in a broad spectrum of dose-dependent adverse effects. This comprehensive review synthesizes recent clinical, real-world, and pharmacovigilance data to critically evaluate isotretinoin's interdisciplinary impacts across mucocutaneous, ophthalmic, musculoskeletal, neuropsychiatric, and metabolic systems. Notable side effects include ubiquitous xerosis and cheilitis, dry eye syndrome, myalgia, dyslipidemia, and complex neuropsychiatric challenges, alongside its well-documented teratogenicity. Furthermore, this paper explores evidence-based mitigation strategies to manage these toxicities without compromising efficacy. It highlights how proactive dietary supplementation - such as omega-3 fatty acids to counter hypertriglyceridemia, and L-carnitine to resolve myalgia-can significantly enhance patient tolerability. Additionally, the evolution of dosing protocols, including low-dose and intermittent regimens, alongside novel micronized formulations that overcome strict dietary fat requirements, ensures consistent bioavailability. Ultimately, the paradigm of isotretinoin therapy is shifting towards highly individualized care. By integrating an interdisciplinary approach that includes routine ophthalmic care and psychodermatological screening, clinicians can minimize risks while maximizing the therapeutic benefits and overall quality of life for patients.

KEYWORDS

Isotretinoin, Acne Vulgaris, Adverse Effects, Teratogenicity, Psychodermatology

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Introduction

Acne vulgaris is a chronic, multifactorial inflammatory disease of the pilosebaceous unit that ranks as the eighth most prevalent disease worldwide, affecting approximately 9.4% of the global population across all age groups [1, 2]. Its peak incidence occurs during puberty, affecting up to 80-85% of adolescents and young adults, though it frequently persists into or presents during adulthood [1, 3]. The pathogenesis of acne is complex and primarily driven by four interconnected factors: androgen-induced hyperseborrhea, altered follicular keratinization leading to ductal obstruction (comedogenesis), colonization and proliferation of *Cutibacterium acnes* (*C. acnes*) within the hair follicles, and the subsequent cascade of localized and systemic inflammation [4, 5]. Beyond the physical manifestations of non-inflammatory comedones and inflammatory papules, pustules, nodules, and cysts, the disease carries a profound psychosocial burden [1, 3, 6]. Even in its mildest forms, acne can lead to lifelong physical scarring, dyspigmentation, social isolation, reduced self-esteem, anxiety, and clinical depression [2, 6]. Consequently, modern therapeutic goals emphasize not only the clearance of lesions and prevention of scars but also the significant reduction of psychological morbidity [2].

For patients with severe, nodulocystic, or recalcitrant acne that fails to respond to conventional topical therapies and oral antibiotics, systemic treatment is required [1, 4]. Since its approval by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 1982, oral isotretinoin (13-cis-retinoic acid), a first-generation synthetic derivative of vitamin A, has remained the gold standard and the most clinically effective treatment available [4, 6, 7]. It is uniquely distinguished as the only available therapeutic agent that simultaneously targets all major pathogenic factors of acne [1].

Acne pathogenesis is heavily influenced by the overstimulation of insulin/IGF-1 signaling and androgen pathways, which activate the kinase AKT and the mechanistic target of rapamycin complex 1 (mTORC1) [8]. This overstimulation promotes sebocyte lipogenesis and inflammation. Isotretinoin radically alters this cellular landscape by upregulating the expression of proapoptotic transcription factors such as p53, FoxO1, and FoxO3 in the sebaceous glands [8]. The forced nuclear expression of FoxO1 inhibits the transcriptional activity of the androgen receptor and lipogenic factors (like SREBF1), drastically reducing sebum production by up to 90% [8]. By inducing sebocyte apoptosis and altering the follicular microenvironment, isotretinoin indirectly reduces *C. acnes* colonization and normalizes infundibular keratinization, paving the way for long-term or permanent disease remission [7, 9].

However, this systemic, apoptosis-inducing mechanism of action acts as a double-edged sword. Isotretinoin affects a vast array of human cell types beyond sebocytes, resulting in a remarkably broad spectrum of dose-dependent adverse effects [7]. These include highly prevalent mucocutaneous reactions (xerosis, cheilitis, and retinoid dermatitis) [7], musculoskeletal complications (myalgias, arthralgias, and elevated creatine kinase) [10, 11], ophthalmic issues (dry eye syndrome, blepharoconjunctivitis, and nyctalopia) [9, 12], and metabolic/laboratory abnormalities (hypertriglyceridemia, hypercholesterolemia, and elevated liver aminotransferases) [13, 14].

Given the complexities surrounding this medication, the objective of this comprehensive review is to critically evaluate the interdisciplinary impact of isotretinoin therapy. By synthesizing the latest real-world evidence, clinical trials, and pharmacovigilance data, this paper aims to detail the isotretinoin-induced adverse effects. Furthermore, it explores the impact of these side effects on patient quality of life and reviews innovative, evidence-based mitigation strategies-including the adoption of low-dose and intermittent regimens, the use of novel micronized formulations to boost bioavailability, and the integration of targeted nutritional supplements and topical adjuvants.

Methodology

To conduct this comprehensive narrative review, a literature search was performed using the PubMed database to identify relevant studies concerning the interdisciplinary impact and adverse effects of systemic isotretinoin therapy in acne vulgaris. The search strategy utilized combinations of the following keywords and Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms: "isotretinoin", "acne vulgaris", "adverse effects", "teratogenicity", "dietary supplementation", and "dosing regimens". The inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed articles published in English, prioritizing recent clinical trials, real-world evidence, and retrospective analyses. Studies detailing mucocutaneous, ophthalmic, musculoskeletal, neuropsychiatric, and metabolic toxicities, as well as evidence-based mitigation strategies, were critically evaluated and synthesized to form the scientific basis of this review.

Results

The widespread expression of retinoic acid receptors (RAR) and retinoid X receptors (RXR) across various human tissues explains why isotretinoin, while highly targeted in its anti-acne efficacy, produces a vast array of systemic side effects [7, 14]. The drug's mechanism hinges on inducing apoptosis and altering cell cycle progression, which impacts not only sebocytes but also keratinocytes, muscle cells, hepatocytes and neural crest cells [8, 14]. Assessing these adverse effects requires an interdisciplinary approach encompassing dermatology, ophthalmology, rheumatology, psychiatry, gastroenterology, and endocrinology.

Mucocutaneous and appendageal manifestations

Mucocutaneous toxicity represents the most universally experienced adverse effect of isotretinoin therapy, directly resulting from the drug's mechanism of action: the profound reduction in sebaceous gland size, decreased sebum production (up to 90%), and altered epidermal barrier function [7, 14]. In a vast majority of cases, these side effects are predictable, dose-dependent, and fully reversible [7].

Xerosis and cheilitis: Mucocutaneous manifestations, particularly xerosis (dry skin) and cheilitis (dry or chapped lips), are the most ubiquitous adverse effects associated with systemic isotretinoin therapy. Clinical data indicate that these predictable, dose-dependent side effects affect a vast majority of patients, with some cohorts reporting cheilitis in up to 100% of users and xerosis in approximately 49% to 70% of cases [7, 14, 15]. Cheilitis typically presents as the earliest signal of drug intolerance, often appearing within the first week of treatment, while xerosis generally manifests within two to three weeks [14]. The underlying mechanism involves the isotretinoin-induced reduction in stratum corneum thickness, altered epidermal barrier function, and profound suppression of sebaceous gland activity [7]. Despite their high prevalence and potential to negatively impact treatment adherence, these mucocutaneous conditions are entirely reversible upon the cessation of therapy [7]. Proactive management is highly recommended from the very onset of treatment; the routine use of non-comedogenic moisturizers, ocular lubricants, and lip balms, alongside potential oral supplementation with omega-3 fatty acids, can significantly mitigate symptom severity and enhance patient compliance [6, 11].

Nail apparatus changes: Nail apparatus changes are an increasingly recognized, yet often underreported, mucocutaneous adverse effect of systemic isotretinoin therapy. Recent studies indicate that approximately 34% of patients receiving isotretinoin develop nail alterations, demonstrating a significantly higher prevalence compared to those on topical therapies [16]. The most common clinical manifestation is onychoschizia (lamellar splitting of the nail), followed by leukonychia, onychorrhexis, median nail dystrophy, and pyogenic granulomas [16]. Furthermore, paronychia accompanied by excessive granulation tissue in the nail folds is a well-documented and frequently reported complication [7, 16]. Although the exact pathophysiology remains incompletely elucidated, it is hypothesized that isotretinoin accelerates the nail growth rate while simultaneously causing the thinning of the nail plate, thereby predisposing it to fragility and splitting [16]. The development of these nail abnormalities correlates primarily with the total cumulative dose (TCD) of the drug rather than the overall duration of the treatment [16]. Fortunately, these isotretinoin-induced nail dystrophies are transient and entirely reversible; clinical evidence demonstrates a complete spontaneous resolution of the nail plate changes upon the cessation of therapy, typically within a mean period of eight months [16].

Hair alterations: Hair alterations, particularly hair loss (alopecia) and changes in hair texture, are less frequent, mucocutaneous adverse effects of systemic isotretinoin therapy [17]. The drug's impact on hair follicle cells primarily manifests as telogen effluvium, which may occasionally unmask or coincide with androgenetic alopecia [7]. Retrospective reviews and clinical trials estimate the overall incidence of isotretinoin-induced hair loss to range between 5.9% and 11.1% [7, 14, 18]. Furthermore, an analysis of Food and Drug Administration (FDA) reports indicated that alopecia accounts for approximately 9% of all dermatological adverse events associated with the drug [5]. While some literature suggests this side effect is not strictly dose-dependent [7], other systematic reviews report that hair loss occurs at a frequency of 3.2% with dosages under 0.5 mg/kg/day, compared to 5.7% with dosages of 0.5 mg/kg/day or higher [2]. Short-term use at low doses generally does not significantly alter hair growth parameters [7]. Fortunately, isotretinoin-induced telogen effluvium is typically reversible upon cessation of therapy [7].

Ophthalmic complications

The profound inhibition of sebaceous gland activity by isotretinoin severely affects the meibomian glands in the eyelids, which are responsible for producing the lipid layer of the tear film [9, 19].

Dry eye syndrome: Dry eye disease (DED) is one of the most frequently reported ocular adverse effects of systemic isotretinoin therapy, with an estimated prevalence reaching up to 83.4% among treated patients [9, 12]. The underlying pathogenesis primarily involves isotretinoin-induced meibomian gland dysfunction (MGD) [11, 19]. By profoundly suppressing overall sebaceous activity, the drug alters the essential lipid layer of the tear film, precipitating tear instability, rapid evaporation, and increased osmolarity [19]. Furthermore, isotretinoin may reduce the density of mucin-producing goblet cells, exacerbating ocular surface damage [19]. Clinically, patients present with ocular discomfort, photophobia, and blurred vision [19], while objective clinical evaluations frequently reveal significant reductions in Schirmer test scores and tear break-up time (TBUT) [9]. Contact lens wearers and individuals with a history of laser refractive surgery (e.g., LASIK) are at a particularly high risk of developing severe complications, rendering such procedures a relative contraindication during treatment [9, 12]. Proactive management is essential; the routine use of preservative-free ocular lubricants, alongside potential interventions such as oral omega-3 fatty acid supplementation or punctal plugs, can effectively mitigate symptom severity and prevent long-term ocular morbidity [9, 11].

Visual and inflammatory changes: Ocular sensitivity symptoms such as photophobia, contact lens intolerance, red eye, and excessive watering are widely reported [9]. More severe, albeit less common, complications include blepharoconjunctivitis, blurred vision, and nyctalopia (night blindness) [9]. A recent cross-sectional study highlighted that 66.4% of isotretinoin users reported a "gritty feeling" in the eyes, and over 75% of active users experienced episodes of blurry or poor vision, significantly interfering with daily activities such as computer work [19].

Musculoskeletal and rheumatological effects

Musculoskeletal side effects pose a significant barrier to the physical activity and quality of life of young, active patients.

Myalgia and low back pain: Musculoskeletal adverse effects, predominantly low back pain and myalgia, are frequently reported during systemic isotretinoin therapy for acne vulgaris [10, 20]. Literature suggests that myalgia and muscle stiffness affect between 15% and 50% of treated patients [20], while the prevalence of low back pain ranges broadly, affecting up to 78.7% of patients in some cohorts [20]. Low back pain can present as either mechanical or inflammatory; although inflammatory pain occasionally raises concerns for sacroiliitis, most cases are benign [10, 20]. While the onset of these symptoms is considered by some to be independent of the daily dose or patient demographics [10], other evidence indicates that a higher total cumulative dose and increasing patient age positively correlate with back pain severity [20]. Fortunately, these musculoskeletal manifestations are generally transient and can be effectively managed through dose reduction or the administration of non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs [10, 20].

Creatine kinase (CK) elevation and exercise: Asymptomatic elevation of serum creatine kinase is a well-documented laboratory abnormality during systemic isotretinoin therapy, affecting approximately 5.6% to 44% of patients [20, 21]. This biochemical alteration serves as a marker for potential muscle tissue damage and is predominantly observed in male patients and those engaging in vigorous physical activity [20, 21]. Clinical evidence suggests a notable synergistic effect between isotretinoin and intense exercise, which can precipitate marked CK elevations even in patients who previously tolerated strenuous exertion without issue [21]. In most instances, these elevations are mild, transient, and clinically silent, often detected incidentally during routine biochemical screening [20]. However, the combination of extreme physical exertion and isotretinoin can rarely induce severe complications such as rhabdomyolysis, although up to 50% of these cases may lack classic symptoms like fatigue or myoglobinuria [21]. While routine screening for rhabdomyolysis is not universally mandated due to its rarity [2], clinicians must proactively inquire about patients' exercise habits. In physically active individuals presenting with significant CK elevations, conservative management strategies, including transient dose reduction, temporary discontinuation of the drug, or increased oral hydration, are typically sufficient to restore normal CK levels [20, 21].

Neuropsychiatric and psychological impacts

The relationship between isotretinoin and psychiatric disorders remains one of the most polarizing and heavily investigated topics in psychodermatology [22].

Pharmacovigilance data: Real-world evidence derived from the European EudraVigilance database (2005–2025) analyzing over 33,000 individual case safety reports (ICSRs) found that 29.3% of cases included at least one neuropsychiatric adverse reaction (NPsR) [23]. Depression was the most frequent symptom (30.67% of NPsRs), followed by suicidal ideation (8.32%) and anxiety (6.74%) [23]. Notably, reports submitted by non-healthcare professionals (patients, caregivers) had nearly twice the odds of including neuropsychiatric symptoms compared to those submitted by clinicians, highlighting the subjective burden of the drug [23]. Rare psychiatric events like severe, dose-dependent insomnia and psychotic mania have also been documented [2, 24].

Despite prominent pharmacovigilance signals, proving causality is complex. Severe acne itself is an independent, powerful risk factor for clinical depression, social isolation, and suicidal ideation [3, 25]. Many prospective trials indicate that successful eradication of acne with isotretinoin improves overall psychological status, reducing anxiety and depression scores. However, the existence of a vulnerable subgroup cannot be ignored. Transcriptomic research suggests that isotretinoin-induced apoptosis in hippocampal neurons or impaired serotonin signaling might trigger depression in genetically susceptible individuals [6, 8]. Consequently, robust psychological screening and the use of tools like the Depression and Anxiety Stress Scale (DASS-21) or the Isotretinoin Hesitancy Scale (IHS) prior to and during treatment are becoming standard clinical practice [3, 6, 25].

Metabolic, hepatic, and gastrointestinal disturbances

Routine laboratory testing has historically been a mandatory component of isotretinoin therapy due to the drug's hepatic metabolism and influence on lipid profiles [13].

Lipid profile: Systemic isotretinoin therapy is frequently associated with dose-dependent alterations in the serum lipid profile, representing one of the most common biochemical adverse effects. Clinical evidence indicates that patients treated with isotretinoin often experience a significant elevation in total cholesterol (TC), triglycerides (TG), and low-density lipoprotein (LDL) levels, concomitant with a reduction in high-density lipoprotein (HDL) [13, 14, 26]. The exact pathophysiology of these dyslipidemias involves isotretinoin-induced upregulation of hepatic apolipoprotein B100 synthesis, which enhances very-low-density lipoprotein (VLDL) secretion and impairs the clearance of VLDL and intermediate-density lipoprotein (IDL) from the plasma [2, 8]. Severe complications, such as hypertriglyceridemia-induced pancreatitis, are exceedingly rare and primarily affect patients with pre-existing metabolic risk factors like obesity or a familial history of hyperlipidemia [5, 6, 26]. Due to the transient nature of these fluctuations, recent guidelines suggest that routine, monthly lipid monitoring may be unnecessary for healthy individuals with normal baseline parameters; instead, assessments at baseline and the second month of therapy are generally deemed sufficient [5, 13].

Liver enzymes: Mild and transient elevations in liver enzymes, specifically alanine aminotransferase (ALT) and aspartate aminotransferase (AST), are recognized biochemical adverse effects of systemic isotretinoin therapy. Research indicates that transaminase elevations occur in approximately 11% of patients treated with the drug [6]. However, comprehensive retrospective studies reveal that the overall incidence of abnormal liver enzyme elevation is low and is rarely associated with significant morbidity or severe liver injury [6, 13]. In most clinical cases, mean AST and ALT levels may increase slightly during treatment, but they typically remain well within the normal reference ranges, rendering these fluctuations statistically non-significant compared to baseline parameters [13]. Interestingly, while these elevations are largely independent of the total cumulative dose, there is evidence of a weak positive correlation between higher daily isotretinoin doses and modest rises in AST values [14]. Additionally, patients with a higher body weight may be at an increased risk of developing elevated ALT levels toward the end of the treatment course [13]. Because these hepatic alterations are mostly mild, reversible, and do not necessitate treatment discontinuation, recent clinical consensus questions the necessity of routine, monthly liver function monitoring for healthy individuals [6, 13]. Instead, baseline assessments and targeted periodic follow-ups are generally considered sufficient to ensure patient safety without imposing undue financial and emotional burdens [13].

Reproductive system, teratogenicity, and hormonal effects

The most severe and irreversible side effect of isotretinoin is its potent teratogenicity.

Teratogenicity: Isotretinoin acts as a potent teratogen through the excessive activation of retinoic acid receptors (RAR) and retinoid X receptors (RXR) within the developing embryo, a process that profoundly disrupts embryogenesis and impairs the proper differentiation of neural, mesenchymal, and epithelial structures [14]. At the molecular level, isotretinoin induces the overexpression of transcription factors such as p53, FoxO1, and FoxO3, which augments proapoptotic signaling and leads to neural crest cell apoptosis-the primary pathogenic mechanism underlying isotretinoin-induced developmental birth defects [8].

Gestational exposure to this drug carries a high risk of spontaneous abortions [27]. In cases where the pregnancy continues, it is estimated that 20% to 35% of exposed fetuses will develop major, life-altering congenital malformations [14, 27]. These fetal abnormalities predominantly encompass craniofacial deformities, such as microtia and anotia, alongside cardiovascular defects, thymic malformations, and severe central nervous system anomalies like hydrocephalus and leptomeningeal neuroglial heterotopias [2, 27]. Furthermore, a significant clinical concern is that 30% to 60% of children prenatally exposed to isotretinoin manifest profound neurocognitive impairments, psychomotor retardation, and learning disabilities, even in the complete absence of overt physical malformations [2, 14, 27].

Because this teratogenic effect is considered dose-independent, pregnancy remains an absolute contraindication for isotretinoin use [2, 6]. Consequently, stringent pregnancy prevention protocols, such as the iPLEDGE Risk Evaluation and Mitigation Strategy (REMS) program, have been implemented globally to mitigate teratogenic risks [25, 28]. It is mandatory to definitively exclude pregnancy prior to initiating therapy, and female patients must continuously employ at least two reliable contraceptive methods starting one month before, during, and for one month following the cessation of treatment [6, 25]. Despite these rigorous regulatory frameworks, poor adherence to contraceptive protocols remains a persistent global issue, occasionally resulting in unintended pregnancies and severe fetal anomalies [28]. This highlights the indispensable role of comprehensive patient counseling and diligent monitoring by dermatologists throughout the entire treatment course.

Female reproductive health: The impact of systemic isotretinoin on female reproductive health has emerged as a significant clinical consideration, encompassing both menstrual irregularities and potential alterations in ovarian reserve. Clinical evidence indicates that approximately 37% of female patients with previously regular cycles may experience isotretinoin-induced menstrual disturbances, with amenorrhea being the most frequently reported anomaly, followed by oligomenorrhea and menorrhagia [29]. These irregularities are dose-dependent, significantly correlating with the total cumulative dose and treatment duration, and are particularly prevalent in patients with a family history of polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS) [29]. Furthermore, systemic isotretinoin therapy may induce hormonal shifts, such as notable hyperprolactinemia and transient suppression of pituitary gonadotropins [8, 14]. Regarding fertility concerns, some studies have noted a temporary decrease in anti-Müllerian hormone (AMH) levels, antral follicle count, and ovarian volume during therapy, potentially linked to proapoptotic signaling in granulosa cells [6, 8]. However, these structural and hormonal alterations are generally transient in nature. Current literature emphasizes that there is insufficient evidence to suggest that isotretinoin permanently impairs female fertility, as both ovarian parameters and menstrual cycles typically normalize within a few months to a year following treatment cessation [6, 29].

Male fertility: While teratogenicity is a well-documented and severe risk in female patients, the impact of systemic isotretinoin on male fertility is a frequent source of patient anxiety that is largely contradicted by current clinical evidence [6]. Contrary to these concerns, the administration of isotretinoin at standard therapeutic doses (0.5-1.0 mg/kg/day) does not permanently impair male reproductive health and may, paradoxically, exert a positive influence on several seminal parameters [6, 27]. Clinical investigations have demonstrated that male patients undergoing systemic isotretinoin therapy experience statistically significant increases in total sperm count, semen volume, sperm concentration, progressive motility, and vitality compared to baseline measurements [27, 30]. Furthermore, robust *in vitro* models confirm that the isotretinoin concentrations typically achieved in blood and semen during acne treatment (ranging from 22 nM to 660 nM) do not induce sperm DNA fragmentation, nor do they compromise the genomic integrity or functionality of human spermatozoa [27]. Cytotoxic effects, including complete immotility and cell death, are only observed at extremely high, non-physiological concentrations (e.g., 660,000 nM) that are unattainable *in vivo* during routine dermatological therapy [27].

However, a nuanced consideration must be given to sperm morphology. Some prospective studies have observed a minor deterioration in the percentage of normal sperm morphology following a course of systemic

isotretinoin [30]. Nevertheless, researchers emphasize that this morphological decline does not reach a threshold that would negatively impact overall male fertility or conception capacity [30]. Moreover, studies have found that isotretinoin administration improves sperm concentration and morphology in men with pre-existing issues such as oligo-azoospermia [6]. Thus, the prevailing scientific consensus maintains that systemic isotretinoin therapy does not compromise male reproductive health.

Mitigation of isotretinoin-induced adverse effects via dietary supplementation

The occurrence of numerous adverse effects in patients may be associated with reduced adherence to medical recommendations. Recent literature underscores the role of oral supplements as an effective adjuvant strategy to counteract these unwanted effects.

Omega-3 fatty acids: omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids (O3FAs) possess well-documented antilipemic and anti-inflammatory properties [11]. Isotretinoin treatment is known to induce hypertriglyceridemia, but co-administration of O3FAs has been shown to significantly reduce triglyceride and cholesterol levels, potentially permitting maximal therapeutic dosing of isotretinoin without the need for lipid-lowering agents [11]. Furthermore, O3FA supplementation significantly decreases the frequency and severity of mucocutaneous side effects, including cheilitis, xerosis, and lip dryness [11].

Folic acid and vitamin B12: Isotretinoin therapy can elevate homocysteine levels, leading to hyperhomocysteinemia, which is associated with musculoskeletal symptoms due to osteoclast overactivity [11]. Clinical trials have demonstrated that supplementation with folic acid and vitamin B12 results in a significant reduction in homocysteine levels [11]. In patients suffering from isotretinoin-induced musculoskeletal pain, this supplementation has led to partial or complete symptom resolution, suggesting its utility in managing these specific adverse effects [11].

L-carnitine: Isotretinoin treatment may lead to a deficiency in L-carnitine, a molecule essential for the oxidation of fats by mitochondria [11]. This deficiency manifests clinically as myalgia, particularly in the lower back and legs [11]. Studies indicate that supplementation with L-carnitine at a dosage of 100 mg/kg daily rapidly resolves myalgia symptoms within a few days, allowing patients to continue their isotretinoin regimen without requiring a dose reduction [11].

Biotin: Isotretinoin's potentially toxic effects on the liver may decrease biotinidase enzyme activity, contributing to the hair and mucocutaneous adverse effects observed in some patients [11]. Supplementation with 10 mg/day of biotin has been shown to improve mucocutaneous biophysical parameters, significantly decreasing the telogen hair ratio and increasing the anagen hair ratio [11].

Evolution of isotretinoin dosing: modern regimens and formulations

The conventional dosing regimen for severe, recalcitrant acne vulgaris typically involves 0.5 to 1.0 mg/kg/day, aiming for a total cumulative dose of 120-150 mg/kg per course [13, 31]. However, this standard high-dose approach is frequently associated with dose-dependent adverse effects, prompting the exploration of alternative, personalized dosing strategies [1].

Low-dose regimens: Low-dose continuous therapies (e.g., 20 mg/day) have emerged as a highly effective alternative, particularly for moderate to severe acne [1]. Clinical trials indicate that while high-dose isotretinoin may yield slightly faster initial improvements, low-dose regimens offer comparable long-term acne clearance [1]. Crucially, low-dose regimens are associated with a significantly lower incidence of mucocutaneous reactions, such as cheilitis and xerosis [1]. Additionally, laboratory side effects, including elevations in serum lipids and liver enzymes, are notably milder and less frequent in patients treated with lower doses [1].

Intermittent and alternate-day dosing: Intermittent dosing (e.g., administration for 1 week out of every 4 weeks) and alternate-day regimens present another viable option to balance efficacy and safety [1]. These protocols maintain clinical effectiveness while drastically minimizing the risk of severe side effects, making them an attractive option for patients who require effective treatment but are concerned about the tolerability of continuous high-dose therapy [1].

Advanced formulations: A significant pharmacological limitation of traditional isotretinoin is its poor water solubility, which necessitates co-administration with a high-fat (approx. 50g) and high-calorie meal to achieve optimal gastrointestinal absorption [31]. Failure to adhere to these dietary requirements can result in poor treatment efficacy. To overcome this barrier, novel formulations utilizing lipid-based drug delivery systems (Lidose-isotretinoin) and particle micronization have been developed [31]. These advanced formulations significantly enhance the absorption and bioavailability of isotretinoin in a fasted state [31]. For

instance, micronized isotretinoin administered under fasted conditions is clinically comparable to conventional isotretinoin taken with food [31]. Food-independent absorption aids patients in consistently achieving optimal cumulative dosing, which ultimately improves clinical outcomes and reduces relapse rates [31].

Discussion

The therapeutic landscape of severe acne vulgaris has been fundamentally shaped by isotretinoin, yet its widespread systemic effects necessitate a nuanced, interdisciplinary approach. As highlighted in recent pharmacovigilance and clinical data, the drug's mechanism of upregulating proapoptotic factors (such as FoxO1) effectively halts hyperseborrhea but simultaneously affects diverse cell lineages, including keratinocytes, muscle cells, and neural crest cells. This explains the ubiquitous mucocutaneous toxicity, frequent ocular complaints like dry eye syndrome, and metabolic disturbances.

A critical point of ongoing debate is the neuropsychiatric impact of isotretinoin. While EudraVigilance data indicate depression as a frequent neuropsychiatric adverse reaction, distinguishing drug-induced psychiatric symptoms from the profound baseline psychosocial burden of severe acne remains challenging. Therefore, integrating psychodermatological screening tools, such as the DASS-21 or Isotretinoin Hesitancy Scale, is imperative for comprehensive patient care.

Traditionally, adverse effects were managed primarily through dose reduction or discontinuation. However, recent literature advocates for a proactive paradigm utilizing dietary supplementation. For instance, the co-administration of Omega-3 fatty acids directly counters isotretinoin-induced hypertriglyceridemia and mucocutaneous dryness, while L-carnitine rapidly resolves myalgia, allowing patients to maintain their therapeutic dosing without interruptions.

Furthermore, the rigid adherence to standard high-dose regimens (120-150 mg/kg) is being reconsidered. The advent of low-dose and intermittent therapies has proven equally effective for long-term clearance while significantly reducing the incidence of severe side effects. Additionally, novel micronized lipid-based formulations overcome the strict dietary fat requirements of conventional isotretinoin, ensuring consistent bioavailability and improving overall clinical outcomes regardless of fasting states.

Conclusions

Isotretinoin remains the gold standard for severe and treatment-resistant acne vulgaris due to its unparalleled efficacy. Although its systemic mechanism of action inevitably produces a wide array of adverse effects, the majority of these are predictable, dose-dependent, and highly manageable. The paradigm of isotretinoin therapy is shifting towards highly individualized care. By incorporating targeted dietary supplementation, utilizing advanced micronized formulations, and adopting low-dose or intermittent regimens, clinicians can drastically mitigate toxicity. Ultimately, successful isotretinoin treatment requires a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach to monitor both physiological and psychological parameters, ensuring high efficacy with an optimized safety profile.

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