

Learn about...

Steroids

What are steroids?

Steroids are a class of man-made drugs similar to the male hormone testosterone. The two main types are:

- anabolic steroids (for building muscle)
- androgenic steroids (for increasing masculine characteristics)

Steroids were first developed in the 1930s to treat a male growth problem that affected physical development and sexual functioning. Today they are still prescribed to people suffering from growth problems and a variety of other health concerns. They are also used illegally by bodybuilders and others trying to increase their muscle mass and strength.

Steroids can be taken orally or by injection. Most often users take steroids in cycles of weeks or months rather than use them continuously. Sometimes people combine different forms of steroids in an effort to maximize their positive effects and minimize the negative side effects.

How do steroids work?

Steroids function in different ways. The primary way is by binding to androgen receptors in muscle cells. When steroids bind to these receptors, they promote the production of specific proteins. This results in an increase in muscle tissue throughout the body in a short period of time.

Why do people use steroids?

Steroids are often prescribed to people who are slow to reach puberty. They're also given to patients with certain blood disorders, breast cancer and diseases that result in a loss of muscle mass, such as HIV/AIDS.

Some athletes use steroids to improve their physical performance. Steroids are particularly popular in sports requiring strength and bursts of power, such as weight lifting, football, and track and field. This is because steroids can reduce fatigue and increase motivation. When a person uses steroids while training hard and eating well, they can increase their muscle mass and strength.



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“Steroids were first developed in the 1930s to treat a male growth problem that affected physical development and sexual functioning.”

Some people use steroids simply to improve their appearance by becoming bigger. This is especially true for young men who are naturally small or lean.

What are the health effects of using steroids?

Steroids impact the hormone system, and in the short term, they may enhance a person's athletic performance. When combined with intensive training and a nutrition program, steroids can increase lean muscle mass and strength.

Some of the short-term side effects of steroid use may include:

- acne
- high blood pressure
- increased cholesterol levels
- sexual problems

In high doses, steroids create a feeling of euphoria, followed by:

- aggressiveness and irritability (also known as "roid rage")
- anxiety
- sleeping problems
- depression
- mania, paranoia and delirium

Long-term use of steroids in males can result in

- shrunken testicles,
- swollen breasts and low sperm count,
- Temporary infertility, and
- difficulty achieving an erection.

Anabolic steroids are not related to corticosteroids, which are prescribed for asthma and other disorders. Corticosteroids do not build muscles.

Females who use steroids for an extended period of time can experience

- increased facial and body hair,
- increased clitoris size, reduced breast size,
- irregular periods, and
- deepened voices and male-pattern baldness.

High doses over a long period of time can lead to:

- ruptured tendons
- blood clots
- stroke
- heart disease and heart attacks
- liver disease
- cancer

When is using steroids a problem?

Whenever a person's steroid use negatively affects their life, or the lives of others, they have a problem with the substance.

Buying non-prescription steroids is always risky because the drugs are sold illegally and not monitored for safety. The substance a person picks up at a gym may look legitimate but could be diluted or mixed with toxic substances.

There are also risks related to the amount of steroids that are used. Many athletes take doses five to 10 times larger than those prescribed medically. Body builders and weight lifters may take doses up to 200 times larger.

Continued use of steroids has been linked to impulsive violent behaviour. Several clinical studies assessing roid rage have shown that people who are most likely to experience it are also most likely, prior to steroid use, to be angry, hostile or violent. This suggests that roid rage may occur more commonly in those who are already at risk for violent behaviour.

Steroid users may also display symptoms of various forms of mental illness, like schizophrenia, mania, and depression. Anabolic steroid use has been linked to a higher incidence of suicide than exists in the general population. Chronic steroid users should seek professional supervision before stopping their use of steroids, as depression and the potential for suicide are especially likely during the first three months of the withdrawal period. Other withdrawal symptoms include mood swings, nausea, fatigue, headache, sweating, dizziness, and irritability.

Using steroids is particularly risky when it involves

- **sharing needles.** People who share needles risk contracting hepatitis, HIV and other blood-borne diseases.
- **mixing with alcohol.** Both steroids and alcohol are processed by the liver and can independently lead to liver damage. Using them at the same time can increase liver damage.
- **teens.** Even though steroids help people “bulk up” high doses taken by adolescents can permanently stop the lengthening of bones and stunt their growth.

Is using steroids legal?

Steroids are legal by prescription only. Anabolic steroids are banned by most professional and amateur sports governing bodies.

What to do if you or someone you know is experiencing a problem with steroids

For information on treatment options and resources throughout BC, call

Alcohol and Drug Information and Referral Service

1-800-663-1441 (throughout BC)
604-660-9382 (in Greater Vancouver)

For information on ways to help yourself with a substance use problem, see the “Tips” section of the Here to Help website: www.heretohelp.bc.ca. The website also features detailed information on substances and mental health disorders.

You can also find information on a wide variety of substance use issues on the Centre for Addictions Research of BC website: www.carbc.ca.

Fast facts about steroid use in Canada

- About 83,000 Canadians use steroids.
- Most steroids users are males between the ages of 11 and 18.



BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information

The BC Partners are a group of nonprofit agencies working together to help individuals and families manage mental health and substance use problems, with the help of good quality information. We represent Anxiety Disorders Association of BC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Centre for Addiction Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kid's Mental Health, Jessie's Hope Society, and Mood Disorders Association of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Addictions Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority. Produced by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC.