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THE BODY
EVERYONE IS TALKING ABOUT... AND HOW TO GET IT

Should you sleep with your FIRST
It’s the ‘miracle’ pill thousands of women are being prescribed to cure acne. But now, many are reporting devastating effects on their sex lives. *Cosmopolitan* investigates...

WORDS POLLY DUNBAR
When she was first given the drug, a small brown plastic-coated pill no bigger than her fingernail, Sarah was ecstatic at the prospect of curing the acne that had plagued her face – and destroyed her confidence – for the best part of a decade. The flaming, carbuncle-like spots first appeared when she was 11, and over nine years her doctor prescribed every cream and antibiotic available, to no avail. As she approached her 20th birthday, salvation came from a dermatologist at a local hospital. There was, Sarah was told, a powerful new drug that could help people like her. There were some possible side effects, of course, she was told quickly. But nothing more than the odd nosebleed – and even they were rare. Sarah agreed to try it. The dermatologist had her sign a disclaimer (of which she never received a copy), then gave her the prescription. The drug’s name: Roaccutane.

It was remarkable. In a few months, Sarah’s skin had almost completely cleared – but her quality of life had taken a terrifying turn. The nosebleeds came first – two or three a day. Next, her hair thinned, her joints ached, her eyes became so dry they were painful to close, and her skin – now as clear and smooth as a hotel-pressed pillowcase – was extremely tender to the touch, as if she had acute sunburn. And she felt low. A kind of black, lingering lowness she couldn’t shift.

A brief Google shows symptoms like these, experienced by women taking Roaccutane, are not uncommon. In fact, it comes with a warning that depression, though rare, can be a side effect. After all, it’s an extremely powerful drug – one of its key components is isotretinoin, which was originally developed as a chemotherapy drug. What the manufacturers don’t make clear, however, is that there are reports that it also could kill your sex drive.

“I had a partner, and before Roaccutane our sex life was amazing,” says Sarah, now 31. “But once I started taking it, I couldn’t summon the energy to show affection through a kiss, let alone sex. And when we did try, it was so painful we’d have to stop.” Eventually, Sarah’s relationship broke down because the intimacy had gone. And here’s the frightening thing: hundreds of Roaccutane users, past and present, have reported devastating blows to their libido – even years after coming off the drug.

The sex myth
Roaccutane is seen by many doctors as a ‘miracle’ drug that cures acne by reducing the body’s natural oil production. But its critics have long claimed its side effects can be far worse than users are led to expect when they’re first prescribed it. The drug was withdrawn from sale in the US, where it’s known as Accutane, following thousands of lawsuits against Roche (the company that makes it), involving claims of birth defects, suicides and acute bowel conditions. The company says the decision was for business reasons, including “re-evaluation” of its product line, rather than concerns over safety.

Last November, Britain’s official drug monitoring body, the Medicines & Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), published its latest review of Roaccutane and adverse effects on mental health. It concluded that there was no proof of such side effects. Complaints about sexual dysfunction have not, so far, been examined – despite widespread anecdotal evidence. The problem is that ‘official’ complaints to medical practitioners are thin on the ground. Some argue it’s because patients are too embarrassed to discuss their sex lives with a GP. But much of the medical community who distribute Roaccutane say it’s because the problems don’t actually exist.

“We’ve received 10 complaints of sexual dysfunction from people while taking Roaccutane,” a spokesperson for the MHRA told Cosmopolitan. “We look into every complaint in detail, but currently there’s not enough evidence to suggest a link between sexual dysfunction and Roaccutane that would warrant updating the patient information leaflet.”

Despite this, Sarah believes her loss of libido and the pain she experienced during sex was caused by the drug. “My sex life just ground to a halt after a few months of being on it, and it took years for sex to stop being painful,” she says. “I stopped taking it nine years ago, but it’s changed how I think about sex to this day. Nobody warned me what could happen, which is why I’m so angry about what I’ve been through.”

Dysfunctional drug
And Sarah’s not alone. A glance at internet forums reveals hundreds of Roaccutane users describing sexual problems: women’s stories of vaginal dryness, painful sex, loss of libido and inability to orgasm, and men reporting erectile dysfunction and impotence. Many users say symptoms continued for a while after they stopped taking it – or are apparently permanent. On one forum, a man writes: ‘My ability to get an erection has disappeared.”
WARNING

Do not give your partner Isotretinoin unless they have been told to take it for a medical condition. This may lead to sexual dysfunction. Do not give to someone who is not being treated for acne. It can also cause a number of side effects, including:

- May destroy your libido
- Can ruin relationships and cause sexual dysfunction
- Side effects could last for life

Keep out of reach of children.

Dosage:
Take one or two tablets daily. Do not exceed the recommended dosage.

Side effects:
- Dim your libido
- Experience numbness in the sexual organs
- Effects could last for life

Pop at your peril

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don’t feel horny any more.’ One woman says, ’I’ve been off Roaccutane for over a year. While on it, if my boyfriend and I had sex, I’d be so dry it felt like sandpaper. I’d end up in tears as it was so painful.

Now, in order for him to enter me we have to use lubrication. I no longer have a desire for sex, and I’m often unable to orgasm.’

A 2005 study of male Roaccutane users in Spain did, in fact, suggest that sexual problems are more common than generally believed. Despite the size of the study (just 20 men took part), its results were startling: six of them developed erectile dysfunction.

Psychiatry professor Dr David Healy, co-founder of the website RxISK, which collates information on drug side effects, has also warned of the dangers.

‘Roaccutane acts on our serotonin systems, and will alter the way most people function sexually,’ he says. ‘The response of many doctors to patients with these issues is, “You’ve only been on it for a month or two, it can’t be that.” But it is a real problem.

‘Men and women are becoming genitally numb – some to a marked degree – and some don’t seem to be recovering. Many patients are put on Roaccutane in their teens, and if it has such an impact on adults’ sex drives, what effect is it having during puberty?’

The human cost

Amy* was 31 when she started taking Roaccutane.

Describing herself as ‘incredibly private’, she’s felt unable to speak to doctors about her sexual issues.

‘In the six weeks after I started taking Roaccutane, I fell into a deep depression,’ she tells Cosmopolitan. ‘It didn’t affect my libido much at the time, partly because I was single. But although I stopped taking it after around six weeks – and while Roche would probably deny it – the effects continue.

‘I’ve been in a relationship for four years now, and my libido seems to have been crushed. I can’t orgasm; it’s as if the wiring isn’t connected. Sometimes, sex makes me very sad.

In an email to his parents before taking his life in 2011, Jesse Jones, 24, a musician from Dorset, cited loss of libido since taking Roaccutane as a cause of despair.

‘I used to have to try to stop myself from thinking about girls all the time; now I could hardly care less,’ he wrote.

His father Derek, who made Dying For Clear Skin, a documentary about Roaccutane after his son’s death, strongly believes the drug causes sexual dysfunction. ‘Jesse’s lack of libido impacted him a lot,’ Derek says. ‘I’ve since spoken to hundreds of families who’ve lost loved ones (Roaccutane users who’ve taken their own lives), and many are adamant there’s a link. Low mood can cause low libido, sure, but it works the other way too – sexual problems can have a bearing on your state of mind.’

Case for the defence

Still, most medical practitioners don’t believe a warning about sexual dysfunction is warranted. Dr Adam Friedmann, of London’s Harley Street Dermatology Clinic, prescribes Roaccutane, which he describes as ‘very effective’, and says he’s never had a patient complain of sexual problems.

‘That’s not to say it doesn’t happen, but it may be linked to depression,’ he says. ‘I always mention the risk of mood changes with Roaccutane, and no dermatologist would refute that it can cause depression, but it’s rare.’

After undergoing therapy, Sarah is recovering from her depression, but she wants to see changes in the way Roaccutane is prescribed.

‘Doctors should ask far more questions before handing it out,’ she says. She also hopes talking about her experience will make others think twice before taking it. ‘Chances are, nothing terrible will happen to you. But is clear skin really worth risking years of misery and ruining your sex life?’

But what does the manufacturer say?**

‘Roche Products Ltd and the regulatory authorities constantly evaluate the safety of all medicines. In the case of Roaccutane (isotretinoin), the regulators agree its clinical benefits outweigh the risks. Isotretinoin is an effective medicine for the treatment of severe acne, with the majority of patients cured of acne after one treatment cycle.’