

Substances At A Glance: Anabolic Steroids

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What are steroids? “Steroids” refer to a class of drugs used to treat a wide variety of conditions, from supporting reproduction (e.g., testosterone), regulating metabolism and immune function to increasing muscle and bone mass or treating inflammation and asthma (e.g., cortisone). They can be prescribed to treat body wasting in patients with AIDS and other diseases that cause loss of lean muscle. Improper use of anabolic steroids can lead to serious health problems, some irreversible.



Steroid use among youth: The true prevalence of non-medical anabolic steroid use is hard to identify because people may not want to be judged for admitting they use steroids. However, it is consistently documented that anabolic steroid use is more common among boys than girls. In Canada, 2.8% of boys and young men report using anabolic steroids without permission from a doctor in their lifetime, compared to 0.3% of girls and young women.¹



Why do people use steroids? Despite the medical uses of steroids, most people who use anabolic steroids do so for non-medical reasons. Steroids are most popular with athletes, bodybuilders and young males, particularly those who wish to appear more muscular. Young adults who report a history of adverse childhood experiences (including abuse and neglect) are more likely to report using steroids non-medically.²



Steroids and the law: Personal use of prescribed anabolic steroids is legal. Those interested in using should consult with their physician. It is however illegal to create, import/export or sell steroids without a license; violations may result in up to three years in prison.³ Using illegal or non-prescription steroids can also be risky, since illicit products may be contaminated, mislabeled or have different effects than expected.



Penalties for steroid use in sport: Steroid use without medical documentation in sports is banned in Canada and around the world. Professional athletes may be required to provide urine or blood tests at scheduled times and/or at random. Those who are found to be using steroids can face bans from participation in sport at any level, including competing, coaching, supporting or instructing. In Canada, these bans can be 2-4 years for use or possession of steroids, or four years to a lifetime ban for trafficking or providing steroids for others.⁴

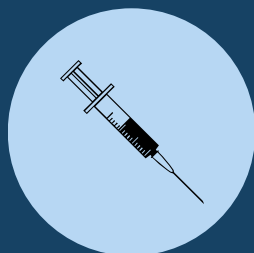


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The RCMP have broken up operations where the substances that were being sold as anabolic steroids were being mixed in a bathtub and contained nothing more than car wax and some urine for color.⁵



Short and long-term effects: Steroids can affect the body, as well as the mind. They can cause euphoria, excitement and energetic feelings. They can also make a person more irritable, paranoid and anxious. Long term effects of steroid use can include developing acne and cysts, breast development and low sperm count in men, masculinization in women, aggression and violence. Steroid use can also cause bones to stop growing properly.⁶



What are the risks of steroid use? Taking large quantities of steroids over time, especially without medical supervision, can cause enlargement of the heart, blood clots, high blood pressure, heart attack and stroke, even for teens and young adults. Steroid use also increases the risk of hepatitis, liver failure, liver cancer, sexual impotence and ruptured or torn tendons. Steroid use, like use of other drugs, can become addictive, costing large quantities of money and causing symptoms of withdrawal of a person tries to quit or reduce use.⁶



How can someone reduce the risks of steroid use? Speak with your doctor if you are considering using steroids. While there are risks associated with use, ensuring that you are medically monitored while using steroids is important to reduce these risks. Your doctor will be able to use blood tests to monitor your physiological functioning, as well as mitigate any side effects. They may also be able to help monitor your mood. Be sure to use sterile needles when injecting steroids, and properly dispose of used needles. It is also important to engage in post cycle therapy (PCT) to restore normal hormone production and levels.



How can I help my kids understand the risks of steroids? Young people who use or consider using steroids may feel shame and judged for doing so. Parents are encouraged to ask their kids questions to understand any motives they may have for using. It's important to listen without judgement to ensure they can have productive conversations with youth about the risks of steroid use. If a parent is using steroids, they should also discuss their use with a reputable medical professional and be medically monitored to address any side effects.



Additional penalties for steroid use: Athletes caught using steroids can face consequences that reach far beyond their future sporting careers. Anti-doping rule violations can result in disqualification of past results and forfeiting any prizes. They can also result in loss of privileges at college/university (including scholarships), financial penalties, loss of any government funding to an athlete or organization found to be using steroids, and a public disclosure of use through a media release.⁴

Reference List

1. Ganson et al., 2022. [Anabolic-androgenic steroid use: Patterns of use among a national sample of Canadian adolescents and young adults.](#)
2. Ganson et al., 2021. [Associations between Adverse Childhood Experiences and Performance-Enhancing Substance Use among Young Adults.](#)
3. Government of Canada, 2023. [Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.](#)
4. Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, retrieved 2023. [Anti-Doping Sanctions.](#)
5. Government of Canada, retrieved 2023. [Anabolic Steroids.](#)
6. Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, 2012. [Steroids.](#)