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ELLEBEAUTY

# Small Wonder

ACCUTANE MAY BE GETTING MIXED REVIEWS AS THE CURRENT SKIN-CARE STAR IN HOLLYWOOD, BUT WILL THE DRUG'S LESSER-KNOWN TREATMENT OF SERIOUS DISEASES PROVE TO BE ITS TRUE BREAKOUT ROLE? WENDY SCHMID REPORTS



**Full service:** Doctors have found Accutane useful in treating full-body conditions such as non-melanoma skin cancers.

**A**sk any agent, publicist, makeup artist, or hairdresser in Hollywood, and they'll tell you: The A in A-list could very well stand for Accutane. These days, nearly every young actress worth her skin seems to be popping the acne drug in the hopes of attaining (and maintaining) a celluloid-perfect complexion. But as Accutane, FDA-approved only for severe, cystic acne, has become Hollywood's guaranteed panacea for the occasional blemish, the drug has been quietly gathering acclaim for treating more serious conditions, such as rosacea, psoriasis, and even leukemia and skin cancer.

## Vanity Case

Given Hollywood's constant aesthetic pressures, perhaps it was only a matter of time before Accutane was adopted as its latest skin-care darling. After all, what makes the drug so effective in battling cystic acne—its ability to temporarily terminate oil production in the skin while increasing cell turnover—makes it equally effective on milder eruptions. Los Angeles aesthetician Dino Morra has noticed a 30 percent increase in Accutane use (or what he

terms "abuse") among his high-profile clients in the last year. "These are not cases of cystic acne; these are cases of actresses not wanting any blemishes," says Morra, who—like other Los Angeles-based facialists, such as celeb favorite J'ai L'one—has developed dermatologist-approved, Accutane-safe treatments to meet client demand.

"Accutane is the closest thing we have to a complete cure for acne," says Beverly Hills dermatologist Sheri G. Feldman, MD, who treats a glittering roster of clients subject to seeing their skin mercilessly magnified by the big screen. "Makeup can hide a lot of things, but it can't hide a bump—because a bump will throw a shadow," she says. Feldman likens the mild-acne-treatment trend to hitting an ant with a sledgehammer rather than just pushing it away with your finger. "But there's no great danger in using Accutane to treat noncystic acne, as long as the patient's overall health is monitored properly," she says. Ava Shamban, MD, director of the Laser Institute for Dermatology and European Skin Care in Santa Monica, agrees.

"I think a low dose of Accutane is safer than long-term antibiotic use, since the latter can create antibiotic-resistant bacteria."

The general treatment is as follows: A twenty-week course of Accutane at a dosage determined by body weight (the average being one milligram of Accutane per kilogram of weight) and the severity of the acne. If necessary, a second course can be given after a six-month break, but one is often sufficient to permanently clear up skin. For a mild case, Shamban usually prescribes a very low dose for up to a year to cure the problem. "But it's still a quick fix if an actress has an

upcoming role, because the surface acne clears in a matter of weeks," she adds. "Accutane is so popular in Hollywood," >



**Vain gain?** "Many actresses take Accutane according to their social schedule—so they won't break out before a premiere," says L.A. boutique owner Tracey Ross.

# ELLESMALLWONDER

asserts Feldman, "because it's just so effective."

## Strong Medicine

Still, many wonder if the benefits outweigh the risks. Accutane may have superpill tendencies, but it's still a serious drug with some potentially debilitating consequences. While the FDA, the manufacturer, and doctors cite nosebleeds, contact-lens intolerance, muscle and joint pain, and excessive dryness of the skin, lips, and eyes as the more common side effects of Accutane, they also acknowledge the rare possibility of hair loss, bone spurs, headaches, night blindness, and depression. (Accutane has been publicly blamed in two teen suicides, but no cause-and-effect relationship has been substantiated.)

Since the drug can elevate blood triglyceride levels and affect liver function, the manufacturer requires doctors to test patients monthly for changes. However, the greatest risk is for a patient to become pregnant on Accutane, due to the devastating birth defects caused by the drug. In the hopes of reducing this risk, the FDA implemented stricter regulations for Accutane in April, resulting in labeling changes and un-renewable prescriptions that expire if not filled within seven days, as an extension of Hoffman-La Roche's long-standing pregnancy-prevention program.

## Wonder Drug?

Accutane (isotretinoin), a derivative of vitamin A, has been proving its skin-clearing effectiveness ever since Swiss pharmaceutical giant Hoffman-La Roche introduced it to the market twenty years ago. The drug quickly became known as a miracle pill in the treatment of cystic acne, and before long, dermatologists were prescribing it "off label" (i.e., for non-FDA-approved usage) to treat chronic skin conditions like rosacea and psoriasis. Manhattan dermatologist Patricia Wexler, MD, has been keeping rosacea patients in remission for almost fifteen years with a twice-weekly dose of ten milligrams. "A very low dose of Accutane is safe to take indefinitely if a condition like this is chronic and you have no intention of getting pregnant," says Wexler, who notes that the drug's rejuvenating effects don't, unfortunately, extend to antiaging benefits. Shamban concurs: "It doesn't enhance the production of collagen or work in any other way like a topical retinoid."

Accutane's real claim to fame, however, may lie in its ability to effectively help treat certain cancers. Some doctors have recently started prescribing the drug for mild, non-melanoma forms of epidermal skin cancer—from basal cell nevus syndrome (an inherited type of basal cell cancer) to multiple keratoacanthoma (a slightly more serious squa-

mous cells cancer). Both of these skin cancers result in multiple, non-melanoma lesions, and, according to Feldman, excising all of them could leave the patient disfigured. Thankfully, these lesions have been shown to disappear with moderate doses of Accutane. "It's not known exactly how Accutane works in this respect, except that one of its mechanisms is to normalize skin cells," Feldman explains.

This ability to "normalize" cells may be the key to Accutane's positive effect in the treatment of some cancers, as well. Phillip Koeffler, MD, director of hematology/oncology at Cedars Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, explains that in certain cases of cancer, the drug has been shown to make the abnormal cells behave like normal ones. "In other words, Accutane effects a cellular change in rapidly dividing, immature cancer cells so that they mature and die like normal cells," says Koeffler, adding that while Accutane has been effective at inhibiting cancer growth in the lab, it's not powerful enough to singlehandedly cure the disease, and more clinical studies are necessary.

Accutane used in high doses in concert with moderate chemotherapy, however, now helps cure 80 percent of people with a special type of acute myeloid leukemia known as promyelocytic leukemia, Koeffler says. It has also been shown to boost the survival rate of children with a rare peripheral-nervous-system cancer called neuroblastoma and to work as a chemopreventive agent in recurrences of head and neck cancer.

As pharmaceutical companies work to develop new retinoid compounds, the hope is that they might one day be able to prevent cancer in high-risk individuals. But, Koeffler warns, "there is not evidence yet to support that theory, and Accutane should never be used by the public to try to prevent cancer." Meanwhile, true cystic-acne sufferers—per-

haps Accutane's staunchest supporters—find themselves irked by Hollywood's seemingly superficial predilection for the drug. "The idea that anyone would take Accutane when they didn't have a severe skin problem is just irresponsible," says L.A. boutique owner Tracey Ross, who is on her second course of treatment for cystic acne. Ross says she's shocked to hear socialites and actresses gossip at parties about self-medicating with Accutane to control run-of-the-mill breakouts. Dermatologist Rhoda Narins, MD, director of the Dermatology Surgery and Laser Center in Manhattan, is equally concerned: "Acne, even in a mild case, can be really upsetting to someone who is very worried about her looks, but this is a drug that can't be taken lightly." According to Narins, the greatest concern with this sort of abuse is that "we don't ever want this drug taken off the market for the people who really need it." □

**IN CERTAIN CASES OF CANCER, ACCUTANE HAS BEEN SHOWN TO MAKE THE ABNORMAL CELLS BEHAVE LIKE NORMAL ONES.**