

Anabolic Steroids

What Are They?

Ever wondered how those bulky weight lifters got so big? While some may have gotten their muscles through a strict regimen of weight-lifting and diet, others may have gotten that way through the illegal use of steroids.



Steroids are synthetic substances similar to the male sex hormone testosterone. They do have legitimate medical uses. Sometimes doctors prescribe anabolic steroids to help people with certain kinds of anemia and men who don't produce enough testosterone on their own. Doctors also prescribe a different kind of steroid, called corticosteroids, to reduce swelling. Corticosteroids are not anabolic steroids and do not have the same harmful effects.

But doctors never prescribe anabolic steroids to young, healthy people to help them build muscles. Without a prescription from a doctor, steroids are illegal.

There are many different kinds of steroids. Here's a list of some of the most common anabolic steroids taken today: anadrol, oxandrin, dianabol, winstrol, deca-durabolin, and equipoise.

What Are the Common Street Names?

Slang words for steroids are hard to find. Most people just say steroids. On the street, steroids may be called roids or juice. The scientific name for this class of drugs is anabolic-androgenic steroids. **Anabolic** refers to muscle-building. **Androgenic** refers to increased male characteristics. But even scientists shorten it to anabolic steroids.

How Are They Used?

Some steroid users pop pills. Others use hypodermic needles to inject steroids directly into muscles. When users take more and more of a drug over and over again, they are called "abusers." Abusers have been known to take doses 10 to 100 times higher than the amount prescribed for medical reasons by a doctor.

Many steroid users take two or more kinds of steroids at once. Called **stacking**, this way of taking steroids is supposed to get users bigger faster. Some abusers **pyramid** their doses in 6-12-week cycles. At the beginning of the cycle, the steroid user starts with low doses and slowly increases to higher doses. In the second half of the cycle, they gradually decrease the amount of steroids. Neither of these methods has been proven to work.

How Many Teens Use Them?

Most teens are smart and stay away from steroids. As part of a 2002 NIDA-funded study, teens were asked if they ever tried steroids—even once. Only 2.5% of 8th graders ever tried steroids; only 3.5% of 10th graders; and 4% of 12th graders.

What Are the Common Effects?

Steroids can make pimples pop up and hair fall out. They can make guys grow breasts and girls grow beards. Steroids can cause livers to grow tumors and hearts to clog up. They can even send users on violent, angry rampages. In other words, steroids throw a body way out of whack.

Steroids do make users bulk up, but the health risks are high. It's true, on steroids biceps bulge; abs ripple; and quads balloon. But that's just on the outside. Steroid users may be very pleased when they flex in the mirror, but they may create problems on the inside. These problems may hurt them the rest of their lives. As a matter of fact steroid use can shorten their lives.

Steroids Cause Hormone Imbalances

For teens, hormone balance is important. Hormones are involved in the development of a girl's feminine traits and a boy's masculine traits. When someone abuses steroids, gender mix-ups happen.

Using steroids, guys can experience shrunken testicles and reduced sperm count. They can also end up with breasts, a condition called **gynecomastia**.

Using steroids, girls can become more masculine. Their voices deepen. They grow excessive body hair. Their breast size decreases.

Teens at Risk for Stunted Growth

Teens who abuse steroids before the typical adolescent growth spurt risk staying short and never reaching their full adult height. Why? Because the body is programmed to stop growing after puberty. When hormone levels reach a certain point, the body thinks it's already gone through puberty. So, bones get the message to stop growing way too soon

Steroid Abuse Can Be Fatal

When steroids get into the body, they go to different organs and muscles. Steroids affect individual cells and makes them create proteins. These proteins spell trouble.

The liver, for example, can grow tumors and develop cancer. Steroid abusers may also develop a rare condition called *peliosis hepatis* in which blood-filled cysts crop up on the liver. Both the tumors and cysts can rupture and cause internal bleeding.

Steroids are no friend of the heart, either. Abusing steroids can cause heart attacks and strokes, even in young athletes. Here's how: Steroid use can lead to a condition called atherosclerosis, which causes fat deposits inside arteries to disrupt blood flow. When blood flow to the heart is blocked, a heart attack can occur. If blood flow to the brain is blocked, a stroke can result.

To bulk up the artificial way—using steroids—puts teens at risk for more than liver disease and cardiovascular disease. Steroids can weaken the immune system, which is what helps the body fight against germs and disease. That means that illnesses and diseases have an easy target in a steroid abuser.

By injecting steroids by needle, teens can add HIV and hepatitis B and C to their list of health hazards. Many abusers share non-sterile "works" or drug injection equipment that can spread life-threatening viral infections.

Steroids Can Cause Extreme Mood Changes

Steroids can also mess with your head. Homicidal rage can come from how steroids act on the brain. That's right. Non-violent people have been known to commit murder under the influence of these synthetic hormones.

Your moods and emotions are balanced by the limbic system of your brain. Steroids act on the limbic system and may cause irritability and mild depression. Eventually, steroids can cause mania, delusions, and violent aggression or "roid rage."

Steroids' Disfiguring Effects

Last, but not least, steroids have disfiguring effects—severe acne, greasy hair, and baldness (in both guys and girls).

The bottom line is: Science proves the serious risks of steroid use.

*See References