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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Fiona E. Lovegrove, MD, PhD, FRCPC, DERM

Dr. Fiona Lovegrove is a board-certified dermatologist and the founder of Lovegrove Dermatology in London, Ontario. She completed her MD/PhD in infectious disease research at the University of Toronto where she also completed her dermatology residency. She is actively involved in clinical trials as an investigator within the Probity Medical Research network and contributes to medical education as an associate professor at Western University. Her clinical focus is on medical dermatology and emerging therapies, with a special interest in psoriasis, atopic dermatitis, and autoimmune bullous diseases.

Affiliations: Lovegrove Dermatology, London, ON
Department of Medicine, Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry, Western University, London, ON
Probity Medical Research, Waterloo, ON

Off-Label Isotretinoin in Dermatologic Conditions: Doses, Duration, and Data

Fiona E. Lovegrove, MD, PhD, FRCPC, DERM

Introduction

Isotretinoin, also known as 13-cis-retinoic acid, has been a mainstay in dermatologic practice since its introduction in the early 1980s. Approved by Health Canada for the treatment of severe acne vulgaris, including recalcitrant nodular acne and acne conglobata,[1] isotretinoin has since been repurposed for a wide variety of other skin conditions. Early clinical trials using an average maximum dose of 1.2 mg/kg/day over a 16 week period demonstrated significant efficacy, with 95% of patients showing clinical improvement and 84% achieving complete clearance.[2]

Traditional isotretinoin regimens involved an initial dose of 0.5 mg/kg/day for 2–4 weeks, followed by maintenance therapy ranging from 0.1–1 mg/kg/day (up to a maximum of 2 mg/kg/day) over a total course of 12–16 weeks. However, findings from a larger dose-ranging study highlighted that side effects such as xerosis were dose-dependent, yet recurrence rates reached 42% in patients treated with 0.1 mg/kg/day,[3] suggesting the need to carefully balance efficacy and side-effect risks when prescribing isotretinoin.

More recently, micronized isotretinoin formulations and a better understanding of its pharmacodynamics have led to more widespread use of low-dose regimens. These offer similar efficacy with fewer adverse effects, better tolerability, and improved adherence.

Isotretinoin exerts its effects through a multimodal mechanism by reducing sebum production, downregulating toll-like receptor expression (thus diminishing inflammation), and normalizing keratinocyte differentiation. These actions make it a versatile therapeutic option for

conditions such as follicular disorders, inflammatory dermatoses, and those with keratinocyte hyperproliferation as a pathology hallmark. Given dermatologists' familiarity with its risk profile and monitoring requirements, isotretinoin has become a commonly used off-label treatment across a broad range of dermatologic diseases.

This article reviews the evidence for off-label use of isotretinoin, focusing on dosing, treatment duration, and efficacy data in conditions where it is most prescribed, beyond severe acne vulgaris.

Common Off-Label Uses of Isotretinoin

"Off-label" refers to prescribing a medication for a condition not formally approved by regulatory authorities such as Health Canada. In dermatology, off-label isotretinoin is frequently used for conditions that are acneiform, follicular, inflammatory, infectious, granulomatous, or neoplastic in nature. Documented off-label uses, also summarized in **Table 1**, include:

- **Acneiform and follicular conditions:** rosacea, perioral dermatitis, hidradenitis suppurativa, gram-negative folliculitis, keratosis pilaris, sebaceous hyperplasia, pseudofolliculitis barbae, keratosis follicularis spinulosa decalvans, nevus comedonicus, and chronic folliculitis.
- **Alopecias:** dissecting cellulitis of the scalp (DSC), frontal fibrosing alopecia (FFA), folliculitis decalvans, and lichen planopilaris.
- **Granulomatous diseases:** lupus miliaris disseminatus faciei and granuloma annulare.
- **Infectious dermatoses:** flat warts and pityriasis versicolour.
- **Inflammatory skin conditions:** lichen planus, seborrheic dermatitis, Morbihan's disease, pityriasis rubra pilaris, and erosive pustular dermatosis of the scalp.
- **Keratinization disorders:** Darier's disease, ichthyosis vulgaris, lamellar ichthyosis, and harlequin ichthyosis.
- **Neoplastic or premalignant conditions:** basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, mycosis fungoides, and field cancerization/actinic keratoses in high-risk patients.

Summarized below are selected conditions where higher-level evidence supports the use of isotretinoin off-label with details on dosing, duration, and treatment outcomes.

Low-Dose Isotretinoin for Acne Vulgaris

A 2021 systematic review by Sadeghzadeh-Bazargan et al. evaluated the available evidence on the efficacy of low-dose isotretinoin for acne treatment.[4] The authors concluded that low-dose regimens, defined as 0.1–1 mg/kg/day, particularly within the 0.1–0.3 mg/kg/day range, achieved comparable clinical outcomes to standard dosing while significantly reducing mucocutaneous and systemic side effects. Notably, recurrence rates after treatment discontinuation were not significantly different between standard- and low-dose groups (34.6% vs. 21.5%, respectively). Low-dose isotretinoin also demonstrated improved patient adherence and cost-effectiveness, making it an attractive option for long-term acne management.

Rosacea

In a 2024 systematic review, Desai and Friedman evaluated the use of isotretinoin in treating rosacea, particularly in patients with recalcitrant papulopustular disease.[5] Dosing regimens ranged from 0.1–0.5 mg/kg/day or fixed doses of 10–20 mg/day, typically for 16 weeks. Reported clearance rates ranged from 71–100%, with improved outcomes observed at higher doses. Isotretinoin was generally well tolerated and may be especially useful for patients with persistent inflammatory rosacea who do not respond to antibiotics or topical agents.

Dissecting Cellulitis of the Scalp

Guo et al. conducted a meta-analysis on isotretinoin use in DSC, which showed improvement or complete remission in 75–100% of patients across five studies, with a pooled efficacy rate of 90% (95% confidence interval: 0.81–0.97).[6] The average dosing ranged from 0.5–0.75 mg/kg/day for a minimum of three months of treatment. Recurrence, where reported, occurred in 24% of patients following discontinuation. While data are limited, isotretinoin appears to be a reliable systemic option for this difficult-to-treat scaring alopecia.

Frontal Fibrosing Alopecia

Shahpar et al. reviewed the available evidence supporting isotretinoin as an adjunctive therapy for FFA.[7] Doses ranged from 10–40 mg/day, with nearly 90% of patients reporting significant symptomatic improvement, including reduced facial papules and stabilization of hair loss. Although current evidence is limited to case series and small observational studies, isotretinoin may be considered for patients who do not respond to topical or intralesional steroids, antimalarials or antiandrogens.

Flat Warts

In a randomized placebo-controlled trial, Olguin-García et al. investigated isotretinoin at 30 mg/day over 12 weeks in patients with recalcitrant flat facial warts.[8] All patients in the treatment arm (N=16) achieved complete clearance, compared to none in the placebo group (N=15). Adverse effects were minimal and consistent with the known safety profile of isotretinoin. These findings suggest that isotretinoin may be a highly effective alternative for managing flat warts, particularly when topical therapies or cryotherapy have failed.

Seborrheic Dermatitis

Luque-Luna et al. conducted a systematic review on the use of isotretinoin in moderate-to-severe seborrheic dermatitis.[9] Low-dose regimens (≤0.5 mg/kg/day) were used in most studies. Clinical improvement was observed in 96% of patients, with complete remission achieved in 45%. The recurrence rate at 3 months post-treatment was 11%. These data suggest that isotretinoin may be a safe and effective alternative in refractory cases where conventional topical therapies are insufficient.

Conclusion

The off-label use of isotretinoin has become an important tool in dermatologic practice, supported by a growing body of evidence across a wide range of conditions. Its therapeutic potential lies in its well-understood mechanisms of action and a familiar safety profile.

This review summarizes the current evidence to provide a practical reference for Canadian dermatologists who regularly manage these conditions. With continued research, and appropriate patient counselling and monitoring, isotretinoin may find even broader applications in clinical dermatology.

Correspondence

Fiona E. Lovegrove, MD, PhD, FRCPC, DERM
Email: drfiona@lovederm.ca

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Disease	Treatment Details	Highest Level of Evidence Available
Acneiform/follicular		
Acne (low-dose)	**Dose:** 0.1–0.3 mg/kg **Duration:** >6 months **Outcome:** fewer side effects than standard dosing.	Systematic Review[4]
Gram-negative folliculitis	**Dose:** 0.5–1.5 mg/kg **Duration:** 14–36 weeks	Case series[10]
Hidradenitis suppurativa (HS)	**Outcome:** 16 patients (23.5%), the condition completely cleared during initial therapy, and 11 patients (16.2%) maintained their improvement during the follow-up period.	Case Series[11]
Keratosis follicularis spinulosa decalvans (KFSD)	**Dose:** 20 mg (0.25 mg/kg) daily **Duration:** 12 months **Outcome:** patient responded to treatment.	Case Report[12]
Perioral Dermatitis (POD)	**Dose:** "Low dose" **Duration:** 6 months	Case report[13]
Rosacea	**Dose:** 0.1–0.5 mg/kg/day or fixed 10–20 mg/day **Duration:** average of 16 weeks **Outcome:** 71–100% resolution.	Systematic Review[5]
Sebaceous Hyperplasia	**Dose:** 1 mg/kg/day **Duration:** 2 months **Outcome:** average lesion count had reduced from 24 to 2 at study end.	Prospective Case Series (N=20)[14]
Alopecias		
Dissecting Scalp Cellulitis (DSC)	**Outcome:** overall efficacy rate of 0.9 with a 95% confidence interval (0.81–0.97). Sensitivity analysis suggested consistently high efficacy, ranging from 0.83–0.94. Recurrence was reported in 24% (6/25) of patients.	Meta-analysis[6]
Folliculitis DeCalvans (FDC)	**Dose:** 0.1–1.02 mg/kg/day (10–90 mg/day) **Duration:** median of 2.5 months (range: 1–8 months) **Outcome:** 82.0% of patients achieved healing following treatment. Those who received oral isotretinoin ≥0.4 mg/kg/day for ≥3 months responded better, with 66% remaining relapse-free.	Retrospective Case Series[15]
Frontal Fibrosing Alopecia (FFA)	**Dose:** 10–40 mg/day **Outcome:** Nearly 90% of patients experienced a significant reduction of symptoms.	Systematic Review[7]
Granulomatous		
Lupus Miliarius Disseminatus Faceii (LMDF)	**Dose:** 20 mg/day **Duration:** 6 months **Outcome:** Complete resolution.	Case Report[16]
Infectious		
Flat Warts	**Dose:** 30 mg/day or placebo was administered to 16 and 15 patients. **Duration:** 12 weeks **Outcome:** all participants in the isotretinoin group showed complete clearance.	Randomized, Placebo-Controlled Trial[8]

Disease	Treatment Details	Highest Level of Evidence Available
Pityriasis (Tinea) versicolour	**Dose:** 20 mg/day **Duration:** 2 months **Outcome:** Complete resolution by 6 weeks; sustained at 1 year.	Case Report[17]
Inflammatory		
Morbihan's disease	**Dose:** mean sustained daily dose of 60 mg/day (range, 40–80 mg/day). The mean cumulative dose was approximately 285 mg/kg (range, 170–491 mg/kg) **Duration:** 10 to 24 months **Outcome:** mean disease-free follow-up period of 9 months (range, 1–24 months). A substantial clinical improvement was not noted until 6 months of treatment.	Case series (N=5)[18]
Pityriasis Rubra Pilaris (PRP)	**Outcome:** 61.1 % (102/167) of patients treated with isotretinoin achieved an excellent response.	Systematic Review[19]
Seborrheic Dermatitis (SD)	**Dose:** Low dose (≤0.5 mg/kg/day) **Outcome:** 96% of patients showed an improvement in SD, with 45% achieving a complete response. The recurrence rate at 3 months after discontinuing the drug was 11%.	Systematic Review[9]
Miscellaneous		
Darier's disease	**Dose:** 0.5 mg/kg/day **Duration:** 16 weeks **Outcome:** approximately 94% improvement.	Open-label multicenter study (N=104)[20]
Harlequin Ichthyosis	**Dose:** 1 mg/kg/day **Duration:** starting on day 7 of life.	Case Report[21]
Neoplastic		
Basal cell carcinoma (BCC)	**Dose:** 10 mg/day **Duration:** 3 years **Outcome:** No significant difference in new BCC occurrence or annual tumour rate between isotretinoin and placebo arms.	Randomized, Double-blind, Controlled Trial[22]
Mycosis fungoides	**Outcome:** objective clinical response was observed in 44% (11 patients), including three clinical complete responses.	Prospective Case Series (N=25)[23]
Squamous cell carcinoma (SCC)	**Dose:** 1 mg/kg **Duration:** >4 weeks **Outcome:** "striking responses" in all patients.	Prospective Case Series (N=4)[24]

Table 1. Summary of dermatologic conditions treated with off-label isotretinoin, including treatment details and the highest level of supporting evidence referenced; *courtesy of Fiona E. Lovegrove, MD, PhD, FRCPC, DERM.*

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