Anabolic steroid abuse: Psychiatric and physical costs

**ABSTRACT**

The psychiatric effects of anabolic-androgenic steroids (ie, testosterone and its derivatives) have been less well studied than their physical effects but are reported to include depression, mania, psychosis, and aggression. Dependence can also occur, with withdrawal involving psychiatric and physical symptoms. Adverse effects of steroid abuse should be managed by discontinuing the drugs—by tapering if necessary—and by treating the symptoms.

**KEY POINTS**

- Steroid abusers typically take doses 10 to 100 times higher than physiologic doses, in cycles lasting 6 to 14 weeks, consisting of daily oral doses plus weekly or monthly intramuscular injections.

- Anabolic-androgenic steroids can affect nearly every organ system. Gynecomastia, acne, lipid abnormalities, abnormal liver function tests, and personality changes are among the manifestations of steroid abuse.

- Treatment of psychiatric effects starts with stopping the steroids. It is reasonable to substitute testosterone enanthate (Andro-Estro) and gradually taper the dose.

- The short-term use of antipsychotic medications may help treat steroid-induced mania and psychosis. Benzodiazepines may help control panic or anxiety in the short term. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors or tricyclic antidepressants should be used if long-term treatment is needed.

- Depression sometimes occurs when use is stopped. Fluoxetine (Prozac) can be used in this situation.

**STEROID ABUSE IS NOT NEW**

Steroid use has gained widespread public attention in recent years, owing to news of abuse by high-profile athletes in professional and Olympic sports. Hundreds of thousands of Americans are estimated to be abusing these drugs, mostly in secret. Incidents of violent, aggressive, and even homicidal behavior have added notoriety to this topic.

Athletes have used performance-enhancing substances since the time of ancient Greece. There are anecdotal reports from the 1940s of steroids being given to German soldiers to increase aggressiveness. In the 1950s, the first reports emerged of steroid abuse by athletes, who used them to increase muscle mass, strength, and competitiveness. Anabolic-androgenic steroids were banned by the International Olympic Committee in 1975.

In 1991, the US Congress made anabolic-androgenic steroids schedule III substances. The US Drug Enforcement Agency controls and monitors their use.

**WHO IS ABUSING STEROIDS?**

Professional athletes in almost every major...
People have known for centuries that castrating animals leads to tameness, loss of male characteristics, and infertility. In 1849, it was discovered that the human testes provide hormones that affect the body. Human testosterone was first isolated in 1935.13

Testosterone, a four-ring cyclic compound composed of 19 carbon atoms, is produced in the body from cholesterol.1,14 In males, the testes are the major site of testosterone production, and the adrenal glands are a minor site. In females, testosterone is produced in the adrenal glands and the ovaries.14

Normal total plasma testosterone levels in males are in the range of 300 to 1,000 ng/dL.14 Most is bound by sex hormone-binding protein and is inactive; free testosterone, the active form, makes up only 2% to 3% of circulating testosterone. Testosterone is metabolized into dihydrotestosterone, which is 10 times more potent than testosterone, and estradiol, which has feminizing effects.15

After its discovery, testosterone was found to be inactive when taken orally and rapidly inactivated by the liver when injected. Synthetic derivatives, made by modifying the testosterone molecule, have enhanced bioavailability and activity. Currently available

### What Are Anabolic-Androgenic Steroids?

#### Commonly abused anabolic-androgenic steroids

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oral preparations</th>
<th>Intramuscular preparations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fluoxymesterone (Halotestin)</td>
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<td>Testosterone propionate (Testex)</td>
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### Risk factors for steroid use: poor relationships with fathers, conduct disorders, substance abuse, poor body image

- Increased competitiveness
- Concerns about body image
- Advances in biochemical technology
- Younger people are also affected by such trends because of the highly competitive nature of high school and collegiate sports.

### Table 1

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anabolic-androgenic steroids (TABLE 1) are active when taken either orally or as an intramuscular depot injection, depending on the position and type of the biochemical alteration.14 Some of these agents are designed to have minimal side effects, and others (not listed in TABLE 1) are designed to avoid detection in antidoping tests.16

Medical uses for testosterone include treatment of some anemias, muscle dystrophies, wasting related to human immunodeficiency virus infection, and male hypogonadism.1,14,15

Nearly every cell in the human body has receptors for steroids, so that every organ system is susceptible to the effects of these molecules.2 Giving physiologic amounts of testosterone has no net effect on plasma levels because feedback inhibition shuts down endogenous production. Users of anabolic steroids take 10 to 100 times the physiologic dose to override feedback inhibition.15

- **ADVERSE PHYSICAL EFFECTS**

Testosterone and its derivatives can have adverse effects on the cardiovascular, metabolic, reproductive, endocrine, dermatologic, and hepatic systems.29,14,17–19 Coronary artery disease is of the most concern.

O’Sullivan et al20 conducted a community-based study of 27 past users of anabolic-androgenic steroids, 14 current users, and 17 potential users (who served as controls) attending a medical clinic established specifically to examine steroid use. The most common adverse effects were changes in libido, changes in mood, reduced testicular volume, and acne. Twenty-nine percent of the present users had hypertension, as did 37% of past users—but only 8% percent of potential users. After learning of the results of the study, only 11 participants (19%) reported that they would not use anabolic steroids in the future.

**Increased risk of cancer, death.** Some reports have found that anabolic steroid use can have more serious effects, including an increased risk of cancer and of death.18

Parssinen et al21 studied 62 professional weightlifters in Finland who were strongly suspected of using anabolic-androgenic steroids and compared them with 1,094 population controls. Over a 12-year period, 8 (12.9%) of the weightlifters died vs 34 (3.1%) of the controls (P = .0002). The causes of death in the weightlifters were suicide (3 subjects), acute myocardial infarction (3), hepatic coma (1), and non-Hodgkin lymphoma (1).

**Vascular effects.** Reported severe adverse effects of anabolic-androgenic steroid use include cerebral venous sinus thrombosis, ischemic cerebral stroke,22,23 and cardiovascular events in the absence of risk factors.24,25 Two cases of limb-threatening arterial thrombosis were reported with the use of danazol (Danocrine), an antigonadotropin steroid-like compound with weak anabolic properties.26

Cardiovascular toxicity may occur via atherogenic, thrombotic, or vasospastic mechanisms or through direct myocardial injury.27–29

**Hepatic effects.** Toxic hepatitis and life-threatening hepatocellular adenomas have been reported.30,31

**Infections** from injecting steroids are a serious problem, although no cross-sectional or prospective studies exist that document the risk. Rich et al32 reviewed the literature from 1966 to 1998 and found three cases of human immunodeficiency virus infection, one case of hepatitis B infection, one case of hepatitis C infection, eight abscesses, and one case of fungal endophthalmitis.

**Orthopedic complications,** mostly tendon ruptures, have been reported.26,33–36

**Sexual changes.** Gynecomastia can occur in men but may be reversible. Many masculinizing changes in women tend to be irreversible.1,14,15

- **RECOGNIZING STEROID ABUSE**

Physicians should be alert to the signs and symptoms of steroid abuse and should consider the problem in patients at high risk. Early recognition and intervention may prevent adverse and potentially irreversible consequences.

Clues to possible anabolic-androgenic steroid abuse are listed in TABLE 2.37 New-onset acne on the back and chest, temporal hair loss, and alopecia are common signs. Subtle personality or mood changes are sometimes the only manifestation.
Psychiatric effects of steroids are hard to study

The psychiatric effects of anabolic-androgenic steroids are hard to study, for several reasons. Many of the available studies were, by necessity, observational. But because the substances are illicit, users have no way to verify their exact nature or amounts taken. Moreover, many steroid users concomitantly take a multitude of other performance-enhancing drugs and dietary supplements that also may have psychiatric effects (TABLE 3).

Prospective studies are hard to carry out because of the ethical issues inherent in testing a potentially dangerous substance. Because many users belong to a subculture of body-builders, weightlifters, or elite athletes, study results are hard to extrapolate to the general public. Most studies to date have evaluated dosages lower than most users report taking. Further, users of anabolic-androgenic steroids tend to use them for prolonged and repeated cycles over many years, which is hard to recreate in clinical trials.

More studies are needed on a larger scale with dosing that is compatible with the supraphysiologic dosages used in the community.

Are steroid users psychologically dysfunctional to begin with?

In addition, pre-existing personality traits that might predispose people to use steroids may significantly confound assessing any psychiatric effects of drug use. Suspected risk factors for men include antisocial personality traits, low self-esteem, and poor body image (body dysmorphia). Porcerelli and Sandler found that weightlifters and bodybuilders who used anabolic steroids had significantly higher scores on dimensions of pathologic narcissism and lower scores on ratings of empathy. Another study found that up to 50% of steroid users had worked as bouncers and described themselves as aggressive regardless of their drug use.

Psychiatric effects of steroids are less well understood

Psychiatric effects of anabolic-androgenic steroid use are not as well understood as the physiologic effects. Steroids act on the central nervous system in several ways: they can affect the brain by releasing endogenous opiate peptides or by converting into estrogen derivatives and activating secondary messenger systems. Electroencephalographic changes are similar to those seen with amphetamines and tricyclic antidepressants.

| PSYCHIATRIC SIDE EFFECTS | ARE LESS WELL UNDERSTOOD |

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<td>Alopecia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endocrine</td>
<td>Glucose intolerance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hepatic</td>
<td>Abnormal liver function tests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infectious</td>
<td>Deep abscesses in the thighs or buttocks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musculoskeletal</td>
<td>Rapid and pronounced muscle hypertrophy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neurologic</td>
<td>Strokes in absence of risk factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Irritability, hostility</td>
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Clues to anabolic-androgenic steroid use

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Mood effects

Uncontrolled, observational trials in the 1930s and 1940s found that men with refractory depression responded favorably to testosterone treatment. However, randomized,
placebo-controlled studies conducted in the 1980s were equivocal.50,51

Observational studies show hypomania, mania, and depression
Malone et al45 retrospectively studied 164 weightlifters and bodybuilders who used anabolic-androgenic steroids and found that about 10% had hypomania. Depression occurred when steroids were stopped in about 10%.

Pope and Katz52 interviewed 41 bodybuilders and football players taking anabolic-androgenic steroids and found that 9 displayed full affective syndromes and 5 showed psychotic symptoms.

In a later study, Pope and Katz39 compared 88 athletes who were using anabolic-androgenic steroids with 68 nonusers and found that 23% of the steroid users reported major mood symptoms (including mania, hypomania, and depression) vs only 6% of the nonusers, and several users reported aggressive thoughts. The higher the steroid dosage, the more severe the psychiatric symptoms.

Perry et al44 conducted a similar study of weightlifters and found more symptoms of depression and mania among users of anabolic-androgenic steroids, although formal diagnoses were not made.

In controlled studies, high dosages led to mood changes in some users
Studies with supraphysiologic doses of anabolic-androgenic steroids found minimal or no changes in mood in most users, but a minority of users had significant mood changes.

Pope et al.53 in a randomized, placebo-controlled crossover trial, gave injections of testosterone cypionate (Depotec) to 56 men, gradually increasing the dosage to 600 mg/week. Most of the men showed no significant manic symptoms, but 6 (12%) had mild hypomania and 2 (4%) had marked hypomania.

Su et al.54 in a placebo-controlled, crossover prospective trial, gave oral methylandrostenedione (Virilon) 40 or 240 mg/day to 20 normal men. Those on the high dose had increased positive mood changes (euphoria, increased energy, and sexual arousal) as well as negative mood changes (irritability, violent feelings, hostility, and distractibility). One man developed mania at the high dosage, and another developed hypomania.

Kouri et al.55 in a randomized, placebo-controlled crossover study, gave gradually increasing doses of testosterone cypionate (150 mg/week for 2 weeks, 300 mg/week for 2 weeks, 600 mg/week for 2 weeks) or placebo to 8 normal male volunteers. Higher dosages of testosterone were associated with manic symptoms.

Physiologic doses have minimal mood effects
Studies of the effects of low or near-physiologic doses of anabolic-androgenic steroids found minimal effects on mood.

Pope et al.56 randomized 23 men with refractory depression to treatment with testosterone transdermal gel or placebo. Treated patients had improved depressive symptoms compared with controls. No negative side effects were found.

Seidman et al.57 in a randomized, double-blind trial, gave testosterone enanthate (Andro-Estro) 200 mg per week or placebo to 30 hypogonadal men with major depression. Treated patients had marginal but statistically significantly improved sexual function compared with controls but no other mood effects.

O’Connor et al.58 gave either testosterone enanthate 200 mg per week intramuscularly or placebo to 8 hypogonadal and 30 eugonadal men. In controlled studies, high dosages led to mood changes in some users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SUBSTANCE</th>
<th>EFFECT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amino acids (various)</td>
<td>Anabolic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clenbuterol (Ventipulmin, equine)</td>
<td>Weight control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danazol (Danocrine)</td>
<td>Antigonadotropin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dehydroepiandrosterone (Prasterone)</td>
<td>Anabolic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diuretics (various)</td>
<td>Weight control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ephedrine/pseudoephedrine (Sudafed)</td>
<td>Weight control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growth hormone (Humatrope)</td>
<td>Anabolic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human chorionic gonadotropin (Ovidrel)</td>
<td>Anabolic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insulin (various)</td>
<td>Weight control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levothyroxine (Synthroid)</td>
<td>Pain control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nalbuphine hydrochloride (Nubain)</td>
<td>Anti-feminizing</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tamoxifen (Nolvadex)</td>
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</table>

nadal men and found no significant mood change in the eugonadal men but significant mood improvement from baseline in the hypogonadal men.

Mania has been reported with use of the testosterone patch (Testoderm).59

**AGGRESSION**

Studies in mice have found aggressive behavior correlating with increasing dosages and duration of anabolic-androgenic steroid treatment, culminating in females killing their offspring.60

**Observational studies were equivocal**

Observational studies of aggressive behavior changes in people taking steroids have been equivocal.

Midgley et al47 compared measures of aggression in 50 users of anabolic-androgenic steroids and 40 nonusers and found that the only significant difference was that steroid users tended to be less in control of aggressive feelings. Although 60% of users had higher levels of irritability and bad temper, no significant difference in physical violence was found.

Malone et al45 performed psychological tests on 164 anabolic-androgenic steroid users and nonusers and did not find a significant difference in measures of hostility and aggression.

Perry et al44 compared 10 weightlifters who used anabolic steroids and 18 who did not and found significantly elevated measures of aggression in those with supraphysiologic levels of testosterone.

Pope et al61 interviewed 133 consecutive male convicts and found two cases of apparent steroid-induced crimes.

Other small studies showed increased verbal aggression in users of anabolic-androgenic steroids and no increased attention to aggressive environmental cues (ie, no increased paranoia; the subjects did not misinterpret the behaviors of others as hostile or aggressive).62,63

**Controlled studies:**

**Also equivocal for aggression**

Placebo-controlled studies using supraphysiologic doses of anabolic-androgenic steroids have also been equivocal.

Kouri et al,55 in the study in 8 volunteers summarized above, found significantly higher aggressive response scores with testosterone cypionate use, but the authors did not report whether a dose-response effect was seen.

Tricker et al64 randomized 43 eugonadal men to receive either supraphysiologic doses of testosterone enanthate (600 mg/week) or placebo and found no increase in angry behavior.

**Physiologic doses do not enhance aggression**

Studies of men taking physiologic doses of anabolic-androgenic steroids found no changes in aggressive behavior.

O’Connor42 randomized 28 eugonadal men to receive testosterone undecanoate (Andriol; mostly used in fertility research, but uncommon in illicit use) or placebo and found no increase in aggressive behavior.

In another study, O’Connor et al58 randomized a group of eugonadal and hypogonadal men to receive either testosterone enanthate or placebo and found no increase in aggression or impulsivity. The hypogonadal men improved in self-reported symptoms of tension and anger.

Ellingrod et al65 gave testosterone cypionate 100 mg per week (a physiologic dosage) and 250 and 500 mg per week (supraphysiologic dosages) to six normal volunteers and detected no increased aggressiveness during simulated driving.

**Serum testosterone level correlates with aggressiveness**

Salvadora et al66 analyzed videotapes of 28 judo competitors during fights and found that aggressiveness correlated with higher serum testosterone levels.

Orengo et al67 measured hormone levels in 50 elderly men with dementia and found that plasma free testosterone levels were positively associated with aggressiveness.

**ADDICTION AND ABUSE OF OTHER SUBSTANCES**

An estimated 14% to 57% of anabolic-androgenic steroid users develop dependence. How
Steroid abusers rarely seek help, and many regard the psychiatric effects as beneficial.

**EFFECTS IN WOMEN**

Few studies have evaluated the effects of anabolic-androgenic steroids in women.

Gruber et al. evaluated 75 female bodybuilders and weightlifters and found that 33% reported current or past anabolic-androgenic steroid use. Among steroid users, 56% reported hypomanic symptoms during use, and 40% reported depression when the steroids were discontinued. Some users developed a body image distortion similar to “reverse anorexia,” in which they felt they were too small.

Ten of the 75 weightlifters had been raped as teenagers or adults, and most started or increased their weightlifting activities as a defense strategy. Seven of the 10 rape victims used anabolic steroids.

**EFFECTS IN CHILDREN**

A few studies have examined the behavioral effects of anabolic-androgenic steroids in children.

Finkelstein et al., in a double-blind, placebo-controlled, crossover trial, gave injections of testosterone in increasing doses to 35 boys and oral doses of conjugated estrogens to 14 girls with delayed puberty. Both treatment groups had more physical aggressive behavior and aggressive impulses than those receiving placebo.

A study by van Goozen et al. compared plasma levels of hormones in 15 boys with conduct disorders and 25 normal controls. The boys with conduct disorders had significantly higher levels of dehydroepiandrosterone sulfate, marginally significantly higher levels of androstenedione, and no differences in testosterone levels.

**TREATING PSYCHIATRIC EFFECTS OF STEROID USE**

Little information is available about treating the psychiatric effects of anabolic-androgenic steroids. Steroid abusers rarely seek help, and many regard the psychiatric effects as beneficial, especially for athletes in certain sports. Illicit use is compounded by mistrust of doctors, a perception that medical people lack knowledge about these drugs, and fear of stigma or negative consequences that may result from drug use being exposed.

Malone and Dimeff reported that four men who had used anabolic-androgenic steroids in high doses over a long time and who developed severe depression when they stopped the drugs responded to treatment with fluoxetine (Prozac).

Rashid described a patient who had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder and antisocial personality disorder who was secretly abusing anabolic-androgenic steroids. He significantly improved when the steroids were stopped. Providing the patient with literature...
about the negative physiologic and psychiatric effects of testosterone was helpful.

The first step in treating psychiatric effects of anabolic-androgenic steroids is to get the patient to stop using steroids and to address any psychiatric or physical symptoms. A short course of an antipsychotic medication can help treat mania and psychosis. In severe cases, hospitalization is needed. For panic or anxiety symptoms, the short-term use of benzodiazepines is usually enough to control symptoms. If long-term treatment is needed, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors or tricyclic antidepressants should be used. Psychotherapeutic interventions to encourage and maintain abstinence are essential.

To withdraw steroids, it is reasonable to taper off high doses by substituting testosterone enanthate in gradually decreasing doses. Clonidine (Catapres) may help in treating withdrawal, as some researchers postulate an opiate-like withdrawal mechanism.

Information about the physical and psychiatric dangers of anabolic-androgenic steroids should be made more readily available for the general population and especially for adolescents.

**REFERENCES**

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