

Legal position

Under the Misuse of Drug Act 1971, anabolic steroids are classified as a Class C schedule 4 drug (with modifications). It is not an offence to possess the drug or to import/export it, providing it is in a medicine form and for the person's own use. It is an offence to supply it or possess it with the intention of supplying.

anabolic

steroids

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What are they?

Steroids are hormones that occur naturally in the body. Some of these hormones, in particular the male sex hormone testosterone have been modified so that their main property is to increase muscle bulk. These modified steroids are known as anabolic steroids, anabolic meaning to chemically build up. Only two anabolic steroids are available on prescription in the UK, Nandrolone and Stanozolol, marketed as Durabolin and Deca-Durabolin and Stromba respectively. Some illicit anabolic steroids are imported from abroad and are, therefore, likely to have other names.

What are the effects?

Anabolic steroids increase the retention of nitrogen by the body, allowing this to be used to build muscle. An athlete's strength will not be increased unless this is also combined with intensive training and a special high protein diet. Steroids also aid in the production of red blood cells which carry oxygen around the body, which has led to the belief that they might be helpful in increasing endurance. It should be noted

that traces of anabolic steroids can be detected in the urine for an average 3-6 months after taking the drug, although this can be considerably longer.

The use of anabolic steroids

The idea behind the use of these steroids is that because they build up muscle bulk they will also increase strength. They do have a limited medical role, such as treating patients with weight loss that is associated with severe chronic illness. Anabolic steroids are also used illicitly by athletes who take them to increase performance.

Side effects

Because anabolic steroids are modelled on male hormones, they can have a masculinising effect on the body. Women may have an increase in body hair, a deepening of the voice, loss of head hair, enlargement of the clitoris and a decrease in breast size. Men may suffer from a decrease in sperm production and a decrease in testis size and the development of breast tissue. There may also be an increased risk of coronary heart disease due to increased blood pressure and raised cholesterol

levels. Many athletes welcome the increased aggression that has been reported as a side effect, as they may feel it helps them to train harder for longer. Unwanted side effects may be greater when steroids are taken in high doses, or different combinations of steroids are used together (stacking). Many steroids on sale are counterfeit or for veterinary use and therefore of unknown strength. Injectables may contain bacterial contamination.

HIV/AIDS

Where anabolic steroids are injected and syringes shared, there is a risk of infection with HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis. These can be transmitted through sharing blood contaminated non-sterile syringes and needles. HIV/AIDS is a particular threat because people who are infected usually appear healthy and may not develop the disease for years. From the moment they are infected, however, they carry the virus in their blood and can infect other people through sexual intercourse and sharing injecting equipment. Those continuing to inject can protect themselves by using clean equipment and not sharing it with anyone else.