

# ROID RAGE



◀ **TURNING TO STEROIDS** can seem like a quick, easy way to get the Greek God bod, but many young men start taking them without considering all the potential risks associated with them, such as balding, male breasts and loss of fertility. Remember that the next time you say you want to look like Zeus.



Cycling, stacking, **pyramiding and plateauing** — sounds like a game of Jenga. These are all terms that describe techniques of steroid usage, something that has become normalized in the **gym community**. Unreachable male body standards set the stage for a network of anabolic steroids, and UM students are hardly exempt. **Juicing** might not be as glamorous as it looks, especially **in the long-run**.

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**P**erformance-enhancing drugs fall under a wide umbrella, but the run-of-the-mill steroids that gym culture uses fall under the anabolic-androgenic steroid category, otherwise called the AASs. Beyond the AASs, there's also growth hormones, thyroid hormones, diuretics and other PEDs that can be used for athletic purposes. Some are taken topically, orally or are injected. Yes, it's a little more complicated than just "test" and "tren."

"There exists numerous types of anabolic agents and, therefore, different mechanisms of action exist," said Dr. Brian Biagioli, the Graduate Program Director for Strength and Conditioning in the Department of Kinesiology and Sport Science at the University of Miami. "Lipid-based steroids, like commonly prescribed [testosterone] cypionate, build mass and promote recovery through standard M-tor pathways or the body's natural process of testosterone interaction with muscle cell receptors."

### Who Wants Some?

Simply put, common steroids massively improve the muscle recovery process. There are others that target metabolism and fat oxidation, like human growth hormone and clenbuterol. But how did they become so normalized?

AASs were introduced as a therapy drug in the early 1900s, but eventually weaved its way into the athletic world in the 1950s, according to the National Center for Biotechnology

After years of athletic experimentation, the drugs finally found their way into the streets during the '80s. The American College of Sports Medicine initially claimed steroids didn't help with muscle growth, and it took them 10 years to redact that statement — how did that get mixed up?

In the present day, steroid use in gyms is relatively common. According to a meta-

analysis by NCBI, about three percent of young men in Western countries have admitted to using steroids. Though steroid usage among women is present, it's not nearly as common as men, mostly due to societal perceptions of each genders' "ideal" bodies. Reasons for usage, specifically for aesthetic purposes, comes down to only a couple possibilities.

"There's the very basic reason of, 'I want to be a pro bodybuilder, so I need to take steroids to get there,'" said an anonymous 19-year-old student who is taking testosterone and looking to compete in bodybuilding. "In IFBB, it's about as close to 100 percent as you can get to everyone being on steroids. Except for the very few genetic freaks. Everyone on a pro stage is taking gear. That's without a doubt."

Competitive bodybuilding is a field where steroid usage is normalized. Not healthy, but normalized. And what about those who just want to look shredded and use steroids to achieve that?

"It's a sense of insecurity that breeds this hasty decision making that you see. Unfortunately, really a lot of guys are doing [it] and women, too," said the 19 year old. "It's a very permanent decision. And that's something most people do not realize when they make that decision."

### Side Effects

The safety of PEDs, especially AASs, are often called into question.

"Under a physician's supervision [steroids are safe]," said Biagioli. "Many people who take steroids have body dysmorphia, so they become mentally addicted to the use and the high dosages promote negative side effects." A steroid cycle may only last weeks, but its effects can linger much longer.

Biagioli lists some of their possible effects: "Hypertension, enlarged heart, acne, personality disorders and liver damage. Death is usually associated with heart attacks," he said.

There are even more side effects based on sex, such as loss of fertility in men, libido, male breasts, irregular menstrual cycles in women, deepening voice in women and many more.

As if these symptoms weren't bad enough, the behavioral effects just pile on. In a meta-analysis by NCBI, aggression was found to increase while taking steroids. Some even experience mania, grandiose and psychotic delusions. Depressive episodes are common as well, especially after stopping dosages and entering withdrawal. It's quite the idiosyncratic process, especially since extensive studies on AAS effects would be unethical.

"It's not a one-size-fits-all dosage, unfortunately. Everybody's different," said the anonymous 19 year old. "Obviously, some people can blast quite a bit of gear and come completely off and continue producing [testosterone] naturally. Some people can take a very small amount and be completely shut off for the rest of their life. So it's a lottery ticket that you have to roll."

The aspiring bodybuilder has experienced a couple cycles of testosterone himself.

"My experience has been overall pleasant, but definitely with learning curves," said the anonymous 19 year old. "You can read as much as you want. You can look at as many studies as you want. You can talk to as many pros, as many coaches as you want. You can talk to some of the most educated people in the world, but you will never have a genuine grasp of what it's like until you actually decide to do it," he added.

It would be lying to say taking steroids was all bad. Beyond the physical perks of steroids, it can even change your confidence levels in addition.

"If I'm going to be completely honest, you feel like 'the man,'" said the 19 year old. "You're physiologically more 'man' than everyone else in every room that you step in, unless you're in a room full of guys on steroids. Emotionally, mentally and even physically, you can genuinely feel that difference."

The confidence boost, the body changes and more is exactly how users fall into an addictive cycle. That's right — cocaine isn't Miami's only addictive drug.

"Almost every person I know [who uses steroids], including myself, has done another cycle after their first; they're the most addicting drugs you can take," said another anonymous male University of Miami alum who dabbled in steroids for aesthetic purposes.

◀ **REACHING YOUR AESTHETIC GOALS** takes patience and hard work, regardless of whether you take steroids or not.

### Changed for Good

Even for those who decide to try a cycle, steroids aren't the golden ticket to a six-pack.

"[Steroids] 100 percent aid quite a bit. I don't think anyone's going to argue that, but at the end of the day, you still need to sleep, you still need to eat, you still need to train hard and you still need to do cardio," said the anonymous 19 year old. "You still need to have a relatively stress-free life. You can take all the steroids in the world, but if your cortisol is through the roof, you won't make much progress."

A lot of people who choose to take steroids for body-image related reasons don't do as much research as they should. Getting a trusting coach who will guide you through bloodwork and unexpected reactions is key. Even then, thinking about long-term effects is pretty rare.

Since AASs suppress the HPT axis and thus the hormones, testosterone levels are often low after cycling.

"After an unpredictable amount of cycles, you'll have no option than to go on TRT [testosterone-replacement therapy]," said the anonymous UM alum. "It's significantly healthier, but you have to be comfortable with the idea that you'll be injecting for the rest of your life."

The 19-year-old bodybuilder mentioned a similar dilemma: "I have accepted that for the rest of my life, at the very least, I will have to take a TRT dose ... more for health and mental reasons than anything."

TRT is supplementing testosterone that your body is not naturally producing enough of, usually at much lower dosages than bodybuilders take. Many older men are prescribed TRT as well.

"You might be able to recover most of your testosterone — being young, running a proper cycle and TRT, but it will never be back to 100 percent," said the UM alum. "Years after cycling, I still have lower [testosterone] than when I was natural."

He even mentioned that he knows many UM students who take steroids but aren't open about it because they look natural.

So yeah, taking steroids will likely make you look more muscular and will boost your confidence, but it comes with a lot of baggage many hasty users haven't fully considered.

"When you're 35, 40, 55 with a family, you may have different priorities in life than to be sub seven percent body fat," said the UM alum. "Even two years from now, 90 percent of 'gym bros' will have different priorities when they graduate." 📌

