

As pressure builds on men to have toned torsos, use of steroids has spread from body builders to the *Loaded* generation. **Mark White** on the vanity-fuelled class C drug and its lesser known cousin, human growth hormone

Quick fix for the six-pack

MAINSTREAM male body culture has come a long way in 30 years. Watch any old TV show from the 70s and the men look like a pasty, flabby different race. Now, of course, we live in the world of *Men's Health* magazine, where a beaming man with V-shaped torso, sculpted six-pack and crinkly smile peers out from between headlines promising better love lives, a flat stomach in 30 days and '10 reasons why bananas are better than sex'.

I have straight male friends who buy *Men's Health* in much the same way people buy the interior design magazine *wallpaper** – as an aspirational title. They may not look like the models, but they would like to, and as they chug another beer while flicking through the pages they are being constantly seduced by the messages: look like this and your life will improve; you'll meet hotter women; have hotter sex; be a success. Metrosexuals walk the earth like a constant reminder of how much time and money can be spent self-obsessing. The beauty myth has crossed the gender divide, and there's a quick fix to getting the perfect body: a shot of steroids.

The vast improvement in the physique of the nation could be entirely down to honest toil, but take a look around you: customs seizures of the drug are on an upward trend, and did that bouncer at your local pub with the fast car and violent manner get his muscles without any chemical assistance? And how about your mate who's started working out after losing his last girlfriend to a younger bloke?

NEW CULTURAL IDEAL

Athletes have been using and abusing steroids, or synthetic hormones, since the 50s, soon after their effects on building up muscle became widely known.



Meat rack: men's magazines are pushing the perfect pecs

But their use is spreading into the public at large with one difference: athletes take them to win at sports, the public to look like the new cultural ideal. Steroids aren't scary like crack, or sexy like cocaine. There is still remarkably little research on their use, but the few reports that do exist make for alarming reading.

The best estimates of the increase in use come from needle exchange centres across the country, where steroid users have recently begun to outnumber heroin users in areas like Merseyside and Cheshire. A Plymouth needle exchange reported a 50 percent rise in steroid users. A new countrywide survey by the NTA is awaiting clearance by the Department of Health, and should be released later this year. The NTA's David Best said the key areas used to be the North West, the North East and pockets of Wales. "They are a tricky hidden population," he added, "so

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estimates of prevalence are notoriously difficult."

A study in the Jan 2002 issue of the *Journal of Sports Science* reported results from a survey of recreational gym users in Mid Glamorgan, showing 58 percent were regular users, up from 39 percent a decade earlier. "The findings... suggest that [steroid] use is no longer limited to the professional or competitive athlete and is prominent among recreational gym users," it said. A report on steroid abuse in the May 2005 issue of the *Southern Medical Journal* looked at the picture in America, calling steroid abuse a "significant public health problem," and reporting that two-thirds of steroid abusers had begun using the drugs by 16.

HEALTH RISK

The British Medical Association declared steroids to be a "public health risk" in 2002, after one-third of all GPs reported patients who were users. The House of Commons Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport's 2003 report said: "We believe that there are sufficiently worrying indications of dangerous levels of steroid use, outside elite sport, to warrant specific research by the Government into the extent of the illicit trade and use of steroids amongst gym-users in the UK." It also questioned the drug's legal status, currently Class C, where possession is not illegal, along with the lack of regulation of gyms and fitness centres that steroid users report as the most popular places for supply.

But you may end up with more than muscles if you take steroids. If you are a man you can go bald, your testicles can shrink, you can

grow breasts, get hornier but be less able to do anything about it, damage your liver and heart and become more aggressive. If you are a woman, you can go bald or exhibit male pattern baldness, your voice can deepen, your breasts shrink, and you will grow facial hair. Both sexes come out in a rash of spots. Users can become psychologically dependent on the drug and take on all the usual dangers associated with injecting.

All this began in the two communities that have always traditionally cared most about how they look: body-builders and gay men. Steroids were prescribed in the 80s as a way to cure AIDS wasting syndrome, but the gym-toned look spread – less weight-lifter, more athletic. "We are seeing increasing numbers of men using steroids and that includes straight men – who seem to use in a fairly

“steroid use is no longer limited to the professional or competitive athlete”

aggressive fashion with large amounts," says Dr Sean Cummings, who runs a private gay clinic called Freedom Health in central London. The clinic has 2,500 steroid users on his books and Dr Cummings says that numbers are climbing.

"High steroid use frequently gets people into trouble with psychiatric disorder and also sexual problems," warns Cummings. "You'd expect logically that they would be hypersexual but in fact many of them become almost asexual as they completely muck up their normal hormonal axis. Many men have a completely unrealistic expectation vis-à-vis the results and will use steroids in the absence of exercise which just makes them fat." Most are professionals in their late 30s to early 50s. "It's not the young disco bunnies but men going through a mid-life crisis," he said. "A lot of them tend to think it's now or never. They build their bodies up to attract a particular kind of man and look a particular way."

GROWTH HORMONE

Alongside steroids like testosterone, lesser known drugs like human growth hormone (HGH) have seen their popularity sky-rocket. Rob Dawson, a County Durham GP and one of the leading UK experts on steroid use, says use of HGH is "getting huge".

"It used to be prohibitively expensive and restricted to the elder athlete and bodybuilder. I maybe had a handful of people over 12 years asking me about growth hormone, now I see one or two a week," he says. The youngest user he's seen is 15, the oldest 70.

"It's being used much more widely," he says. "It's a product that was only used in muscle building competitions that's now widely available." In a survey where elite gym-goers were told: if there was this drug that could boost your performance to incredible levels, make your muscles grow, give you the edge – and the only drawback was that you would die within five years of taking it, would you still take it? A full 90 percent said yes, they would.

The Home Office issued a safety warning on HGH, saying some counterfeit sources could be "harmful and in some cases life threatening", following a string of enquiries from the public about HRH.

James McVeigh, at the Centre of Public Health, Liverpool John Moores University, tested internet-sold steroids and found while they were pure, the strength varied significantly. There are also drawbacks to using HGH: it can cause acromegaly, where soft tissue and the internal organs swell up and the brow and jaw grow abnormally large, like a caveman.

Ultimately, steroid use is a beauty myth that will end up biting back savagely. You're still going to get old, and there's always going to be someone with a better body than you, and if there isn't, they'll be younger and prettier. ■