

Human Growth Hormone

(Trade Names: Genotropin®, Humatrope®, Norditropin®, Omnitrope®, Nutropin®, Saizen®, Serostim®, Zomacton®, Zorbativ®®, Nutropin AQ®)

Introduction:

Human growth hormone (hGH) is a naturally occurring polypeptide hormone secreted by the brain's pituitary gland and is essential for normal human growth and development. Daily secretion of hGH increases throughout childhood, peaking during adolescence, and steadily declining thereafter. In 1985, synthetic hGH was developed (aka recombinant human growth hormone; rhGH) and approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the treatment of children with growth hormone deficiency (GHD). Since then, it has been approved for various other pediatric conditions linked to growth disorders. However, it is commonly abused by athletes, bodybuilders, and aging adults for its ability to increase muscle mass and decrease body fat, as well as its purported potential to improve athletic performance and reverse the effects of aging.

Licit Uses:

Several FDA-approved injectable hGH preparations (liquid or powder with a diluent for reconstitution) are available by prescription from a supervising physician for various indications. In children, rhGH is approved for the treatment of Turner's syndrome, Prader-Willi syndrome, chronic renal insufficiency, hGH deficiency, and for idiopathic short stature. Accepted medical uses in adults include the treatment of the wasting syndrome of AIDS and hGH deficiency. The recommended dosages for children and adults are 40 and 25 µg/kg/day, respectively.

Chemistry:

hGH is a small protein and using recombinant DNA technology, two forms of synthetic hGH were developed, somatropin and somatrem. Somatropin is identical to the endogenous pituitary-derived hGH, whereas somatrem has an extra amino acid on the N-terminus. Synthetic hGH is chemically indistinguishable from the naturally occurring hormones in blood and urine tests.

Pharmacology:

hGH synthetic forms have similar biological actions and potencies as the endogenous hGH polypeptide. hGH binds to growth hormone receptors present on cells throughout the body. hGH functions to regulate body composition, fluid homeostasis, glucose and lipid metabolism, skeletal muscle, bone growth, and possibly cardiac functioning. Sleep, exercise, and stress all increase the secretion of hGH.

The use of hGH is associated with several adverse effects including edema, carpal tunnel syndrome, joint pain, muscle pain, and abnormal skin sensations (e.g., numbness and tingling). It may also increase the growth of pre-existing malignant cells and increase the possibility of developing diabetes. hGH is administered by subcutaneous or intramuscular injections. The circulating half-life of hGH is relatively short (20-30 minutes), while its biological half-life is much longer (9-17 hours) due to its indirect effects.

Illicit Uses:

Human growth hormone is illicitly used as an anti-aging agent, to improve athletic performance and for bodybuilding purposes. It is marketed, distributed, and illegally prescribed off-label to aging adults to replenish declining hGH levels and reverse age-related bodily deterioration. It is also abused for its ability to alter body composition by reducing body fat and increasing skeletal muscle mass. It is often used in combination with other performance enhancing drugs such as anabolic steroids. Athletes may also use it to improve their athletic performance, although the ability of hGH to increase athletic performance is debatable.

Illicit Distribution:

The illicit distribution of hGH occurs as the result of physicians illegally prescribing it for off-label uses and for the treatment of FDA-approved medical conditions without examination and supervision. Illicit distribution also involves diverted hGH obtained through theft, smuggled hGH illegally imported from other countries, and counterfeit hGH.

The illicit distribution of injectable synthetic hGH formulations is thought to be primarily through Internet pharmacies, as well as wellness and anti-aging clinics and websites. Internet pharmacies are often partnered with a physician willing to write prescriptions for a fee without a physical examination. Individuals may also obtain hGH without a prescription through the black market. hGH is often marketed with other performance enhancing drugs (e.g., anabolic steroids).

DEA's National Forensic Laboratory Information System (NFLIS) Drug database collects scientifically verified data on drug items and cases submitted to and analyzed by participating federal, state, and local forensic drug laboratories. NFLIS-Drug received over 150 reports of hGH since it was first reported in 2001, including 5 reports in 2021, 0 in 2022, 1 in 2023, 1 in 2024, and 0 in 2025.

Control Status:

Human growth hormone is not controlled under the Controlled Substances Act. However, as part of the 1990 Anabolic Steroids Control Act, the distribution and possession, with the intent to distribute, of hGH *"for any use...other than the treatment of a disease or other recognized medical condition, where such use has been authorized by the Secretary of Health and Human Services...and pursuant to the order of a physician..."* was criminalized as a five-year felony under the penalties chapter of the Food, Drug, and Cosmetics Act of the FDA.

hGH is listed by the World Anti-Doping Agency and the International Olympic Committee as a performance enhancing drug barring athletes from using it.

Comments and additional information are welcomed by the Drug and Chemical Evaluation Section; Fax 571-362-4250, Telephone 571-362-3249, or Email: DPE@dea.gov.