

As reality TV's Chantelle Houghton blames her latest break-up on 'roid-rage'...



By Dr Ellie Cannon

I'm not usually a follower of celebrity break-ups, but one such story last weekend caught my eye. Rav Wilding, the Crimewatch TV presenter, was accused by his former girlfriend, Celebrity Big Brother winner Chantelle Houghton, of 'roid-rage' – aggressive, and even violent behaviour believed to be a side effect of body-building steroid drugs.

These claims were backed up with shocking photographs of Rav yelling at Chantelle as she wept in a park. But the story was not all it seemed. In his defence, Rav said he had taken steroids – but for asthma, rather than for body-building.

I can't even begin to diagnose the cause of their argument. But as a GP, I am acutely aware that Chantelle isn't alone in her confusion about medicines.

There are a large number of misconceptions and worries surrounding steroids, which are some of the most commonly taken drugs in the world, and I hear them on an almost daily basis from patients.

Steroids are a group of medications that have very powerful anti-inflammatory properties and can treat a range of illnesses. They are used to control chronic conditions such as eczema and arthritis, as well as to calm down the immune system when it is overactive – in hay fever, for example.

They are found in tablets, creams, inhalers and sprays and can be injected directly into a joint to reduce pain and inflammation. You can even get steroid eye drops.

Steroid treatment can be life-saving in some instances, for example in cases of acute asthma or a severe allergic reaction.

These drugs have nothing to do with the steroids taken by sportsmen to enhance performance (cyclist Lance Armstrong was again accused of 'doping' last week).

The steroids we use as medicine are a synthetic version of natural hormones that exist in the body known as corticosteroids.

The ones body-builders take are known as anabolic steroids, and are similar to the male sex hormone testosterone which builds up muscle bulk in the body. The side effects can be dreadful: acne, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, impo-

Steroids that WILL save your life, but WON'T make you aggressive



SPLIT: Chantelle with her former boyfriend, Crimewatch TV presenter Rav Wilding



ACCUSED: Cyclist Lance Armstrong has denied doping allegations

tence, kidney and liver disease and, yes, aggressive behaviour.

Excessive testosterone levels are converted into oestrogen, so men can also grow breast tissue.

That isn't to say steroid medicines prescribed by doctors don't have side effects. But do they make people more aggressive? In the majority of cases, no.

Most asthma sufferers use inhaled steroids – known as a preventer inhaler – on a twice-daily basis to calm the inflammation caused by asthma, and prevent any attacks of

symptoms. As the drugs are delivered directly to the lungs, with tiny amounts entering the bloodstream, side effects are minimised – and definitely don't include aggression.

Sufferers may also take a five-day course of steroid tablets – known as prednisolone – when their asthma is very bad. A small minority of asthmatics are on daily steroid tablets for a longer period, and it is these patients who may start to suffer side effects. Long-term use can affect mood, often aggravating depression and causing irritability

as well as insomnia and nightmares – all of which can obviously contribute to aggression. Whether Rav falls into this category we don't know, but given his seeming healthiness it is unlikely.

Steroids make patients more prone to infection, as they damp down the immune system, and can cause osteoporosis – bone-thinning – in long-term users.

They also make people gain weight, particularly around the face, and cause high blood pressure, muscle weakness and stomach ulcers. Steroids increase blood-sugar levels and can lead to diabetes.

Children using long-term steroids are at risk of stunted growth. These side effects occur only in long-term use, which is more than a month, and in those on high doses – and don't happen to everyone. But all steroid users are monitored, for example, with regular blood-pressure checks and bone scans.

Even steroid creams, such as hydrocortisone, available over the counter, can be dangerous if used for too long. Care must be taken to

use the smallest amount, of the mildest steroid for as short a period as possible. Side effects include thinning skin, facial hair, spots, losing skin colour, and stretch marks. For steroid cream to be effective, it needs to be used on moisturised skin.

My big worry when I see stories confusing the helpful steroids with the body-building kind is that patients will be discouraged from taking their medicine.

You must never suddenly stop taking steroid tablets. When we take steroids, we stop producing the natural steroids the body makes.

If you stop the tablets suddenly, you have no natural steroids in the body either and this can cause dramatic, even life-threatening, drops in blood sugar and blood pressure.

Don't be scared of steroids... they might just save your life.

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Doctor Heal Thyself

FRUIT AND NUTS FOR LUNCH

A few years ago I was a stone overweight but I had neither the time nor the inclination to go on a diet or exercise more than I already was. I worked out that my hospital canteen lunches were the culprit so, rather than drastically changing my lifestyle, I decided to eat only fruit and nuts at lunch. Now I'm thinner and there's the added bonus that I can eat pretty much what I like in the evenings, too.

I'M AGAINST MULTIVITAMINS

I take a super-strength Vitamin D supplement in winter and an omega-3 rich fish oil all year round but that is it. I am against most multivitamins as some vitamin combinations cancel out the effect of each other.



SURF'S UP

It's tempting to become a couch potato when in pain, but the best thing to do is to keep moving. I now do ten minutes of daily stretches and regular exercise. I love cycling to work and tennis – and I have even learned to surf.

Professor Tim Spector, 52, consultant rheumatologist at St Thomas' Hospital, London, was awarded the International Prize in Osteoarthritis Clinical Research in 2007. He lives with his wife Veronique and their two children in London.

