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**Phytosterol consumption and the anabolic steroid boldenone in humans: a hypothesis piloted**

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4 **Phytosterol consumption and the anabolic steroid boldenone in**  
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6 **humans: a hypothesis piloted**  
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## Abstract

The presence of the anabolic steroid boldenone in animals has become a research topic as its occurrence is proposed to be a marker for illegal hormone administration. However, boldenone can also be formed from  $\beta$ -sitosterol, a phytosterol present in animal feed, as well as from endogenous sources. The observations in animals together with the increased consumption of phytosterol-enriched foods in the western population led us to the hypothesis that consumption of phytosterol-enriched foods might possibly lead to increased boldenone levels in humans. We performed a pilot study among female volunteers (n=10) to investigate whether boldenone concentrations in urine were detectable after consumption of 25 g/day of phytosterol-enriched margarines for one week. Urine samples were collected at day 0, day 3 or 4 and day 7. Urine of a sitosterolemia (a rare autosomal recessively inherited lipid metabolic disorder) patient was collected as a positive control case. No traces of boldenone were detected in either the volunteers or in the patient. In conclusion, there is no evidence of formation of boldenone in women after consumption of the recommended amount of phytosterol-enriched margarines.

## Introduction

For a number of years, the presence of the anabolic steroid boldenone (1-dehydrotestosterone or androsta-1,4-diene-17 $\beta$ -ol-3-one) in various animal species has become a topic of research as the occurrence of this hormone or its metabolites in biological samples is proposed to be a marker for illegal hormone administration (De Brabander and others 2004). Especially urine samples of cattle and veal calves have been subject of research in various EU countries. The investigation into the origin of the boldenone in bovine urine is still ongoing. Boldenone can be formed from  $\beta$ -sitosterol (a phytosterol naturally occurring in plants) present in animal feed, but also endogenous production can still be one of the sources (Poelmans and others 2005). Phytosterols are a normal constituent of the human diet. Normal levels of consumption are approximately 200-400 mg/day, which may increase to 700-800 mg/day in those who consume a large amount of soy-based foods (Andersson and others 2004). The recently introduced phytosterol-enriched foods deliver 2-3 g of phytosterols per day if the recommended amount is consumed. The intestinal absorption of phytosterols is estimated between 0.4-3.5% (Hallikainen and others 2000).

The observations in animals together with the increased consumption of phytosterol-enriched foods in the western population to lower (slightly) elevated serum cholesterol levels lead us to the hypothesis that in humans phytosterol-enriched food may possibly lead to an unwanted amount of the anabolic steroid boldenone as in animals. This would then identify a new potential health hazard in humans.

Phytosterol-enriched margarines are on the market for some years now, and other plant sterol-enriched food products including dairy products have also been introduced. The

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phytosterols are thought to displace cholesterol from mixed micelles in the intestine and thereby reduce intestinal cholesterol absorption; the exact mechanism, however, remains still unknown (Katan and others 2003). In animals boldenone works as an anabolic agent and is misused in cattle fattening. It is commonly used to enhance athletic performance and muscular development in humans. Hypertension, heart attacks, strokes, liver and other types of internal organ cancers have been associated with anabolic steroid use (De Brabander and others 2004; Sullivan and others 1998).

Within the framework of Postlaunch Monitoring (PLM) of functional foods in which positive but also potential side effects are investigated (de Jong and others 2004; 2005a; 2005b; Wolfs and others 2006) we studied the hypothesis postulated above. To our knowledge there were no data of biotransformation of the phytosterol  $\beta$ -sitosterol into boldenone in humans. We performed a pilot study in 10 women to investigate whether boldenone concentrations in urine were detectable after consumption of the recommended daily amounts of phytosterol-enriched margarines. In addition, a urine sample of a sitosterolemia patient was analysed as a positive control case. Patients with sitosterolemia are characterized by a > 50-fold elevation in plasma phytosterol levels, which results from an increased absorption and decreased hepatic removal of phytosterols that leads to accumulation of phytosterols in blood and tissues (Ketomaki and others 2005). Because these patients have very high levels of plasma phytosterols we anticipated that especially in these patients the presence of boldenone might be demonstrated.

## Materials and methods

### *Study design*

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3 For our pilot 10 healthy female volunteers (aged 22 to 51) were recruited. In daily life,  
4 these women did not use phytosterol-enriched margarines. We included only women  
5 because they excrete less to none anabolic hormones by nature. During our one week  
6 trial we provided phytosterol-enriched margarines. The participants were asked to  
7 consume 25 grams per day (i.e. 2 grams of phytosterols or ~1 gram of  $\beta$ -sitosterol) of  
8 the phytosterol-enriched margarines, which corresponds to the recommended intake by  
9 the manufacturer. At the beginning of the study 7 portions of 25 grams were distributed  
10 to the volunteers. Spot urine samples were collected on day 0, on day 3 or 4, and on  
11 day 7 at around lunchtime. In this way we collected one voidance from a day at about  
12 the same time. Within 30 minutes after collection the urine samples were frozen at  
13 minus 20°C. As a normal food product was supplied in physiological quantities and the  
14 collection of spot urine samples was not invasive, no authorization from the medical  
15 ethical committee was necessary (personal communication with the Medical  
16 Committee of Ethics of the University Medical Centre Utrecht, April 2006). The  
17 volunteers received a little incentive after participation.  
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41 In the blind urine samples,  $\beta$ -sitosterol, campesterol, stigmasterol,  $\beta$ -boldenone,  $\alpha$ -  
42 boldenone,  $\alpha$ -testosterone and  $\beta$ -testosterone were analysed according to ARO-SOP  
43 507 (ARO-SOP 507 RIVM: Bilthoven) a detailed description of which follows below.  
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45 In addition, one spot urine sample of our positive control case, i.e. a patient with  
46 sitosterolemia, was collected and analysed.  
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## 55 **Method of analysis**

### 56 *Chemicals*

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3 All chemicals and reagents were of high purity quality.  $\alpha/\beta$ -boldenone,  $\alpha/\beta$ -  
4 testosterone, androsterone, etiocholanolon,  $\alpha$ -androsterone, testosterone-D2 and  $\beta$ -  
5 boldenone-D3 were obtained from the RIVM-CRL, Bank of Reference Standards.  
6  
7 Cholesterol, coprostanol, campesterol,  $\beta$ -sitosterol, stigmasterol were obtained from  
8 Matreya. Cholesterol-D6 was obtained from Isotel.  $\beta$ -glucuronidase from E.Coli K12  
9 (Roche). Derivatization reagent for coprostanol, cholesterol, cholesterol-D6,  
10 campesterol and sitosterol consists of 25  $\mu$ l N-methyl-N-  
11 trimethylsilyltrifluoroacetamide (MSTFA) / ammoniumiodide/dithiothreitol (1000:2:4,  
12 v/w/w) (Alltech), for  $\alpha/\beta$ -boldenone,  $\alpha/\beta$ -testosterone, androsterone, etiocholanolon,  $\alpha$ -  
13 androsteron, testosterone-D2 and  $\beta$ -boldenone-D3 the derivatization reagent consisted  
14 of 10  $\mu$ l heptafluorobutyric Acid Anhydride (HFAA) (Pierce) and 40  $\mu$ l of dried  
15 acetone. Phosphate buffer pH 7.4 was prepared by dissolving 2.278 g of  
16 disodiumhydrogenphosphate and 0.416 g of potassium-dihydrogenphosphate in 800 ml  
17 of water, the pH was adjusted to  $7.4 \pm 0.1$  and water was added to a final volume of  
18 1000 ml.  
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#### 41 *Apparatus*

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43 Liquid Chromatography (LC): Waters Chromatography autosampler, two Waters  
44 pumps, Pharmacia controller, ThermoQuest multi-channel UV-detector. HPLC-column  
45 used was a Superspher RP-18 (L 125 mm, 4 mm ID, 4  $\mu$ m) with pre-column (Waters).  
46  
47 Column temperature 40°C. Fraction-collector (Foxy Jr). Datasystem, PC1000  
48 ThermoQuest. The LC mobile phase consists of solution A: 65:35 v/v-%  
49 methanol/water, solution B: 100% methanol. Gradient starts at 0% B, after 8 min the  
50 percentage B is increased in 8 min to 100% and remains at 100% till 25 min. The  
51 gradient then returns in 0.1 min to the initial condition. The flow rate was 0.7 ml/min.  
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6 Gas-Chromatography coupled to a mass-spectrometer (GC-MS) analysis was carried  
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8 out on an Agilent 5973 MSD. GC capillary column, 30 meter VF-17MS (Varian) i.d.  
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10 0.25 mm, 0.15  $\mu\text{m}$  film thickness, constant flow of 1.1 ml helium/minute. Injection,  
11  
12 splitless mode at 250°C, injection volume 2  $\mu\text{l}$ . The oven temperature was kept  
13  
14 constant at 80°C for 1 min and was increased, 20°C per min, to 340°C and was kept  
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16 constant at this temperature for 4 min.  
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### 22 *Extraction procedure*

#### 23 *Isolation*

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25 A sample portion of 5 ml of urine was transferred to a 10 ml glass tube. The samples  
26  
27 were spiked with 10 ng  $\beta$ -boldenone-D3 , 10 ng testosterone-D2 and 25 cholesterol-  
28  
29 D6. To the samples 1 ml of phosphate buffer (pH 7.4) and 50  $\mu\text{l}$  of  $\beta$ -glucuronidase  
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31 was added. The mixture was vortexed and hydrolysed for 3 hours at 52°C.  
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39 A SPE C<sub>18</sub> column (3 ml) was preconditioned with 3 ml of methanol and 3 ml of water.  
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41 The centrifuged sample was passed through the column. The SPE C<sub>18</sub> column was  
42  
43 washed with 3 ml of water and 3 ml 30:70 v/v-% acetonitrile/water. The anabolic  
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45 steroids were eluted with 4 ml of 80:20 v/v-% methanol/water. The eluate was  
46  
47 evaporated at 55°C under a gentle stream of nitrogen until dry and further processed as  
48  
49 described in Preparative HPLC. The sterols were eluted with 3 ml of iso-octane, the  
50  
51 eluate was collected and evaporated at 55°C under a gentle nitrogen until dryness and  
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53 derivatised as described under derivatisation.  
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### *Preparative HPLC*

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3 The dried extracts were reconstituted in 120  $\mu\text{l}$  of 65:35 v/v-% methanol/water, from  
4 which 100  $\mu\text{l}$  was injected. One fraction was collected from 4.9 to 20 minutes. The  
5  
6 collected fraction was dried under a stream of nitrogen. The dried extracts were  
7  
8 reconstituted in 300  $\mu\text{l}$  ethanol, transferred to a 2 ml vial and evaporated at 55°C under  
9  
10 a gentle stream of nitrogen to dryness.  
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### 15 16 17 *Derivatisation*

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19 The dried extracts containing cholesterol, coprostanol, campesterol, sitosterol and  
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21 cholesterol-D6 were reconstituted in 20  $\mu\text{l}$  of derivatisation reagent (MSTFA++) and  
22  
23 incubated for one hour at 60°C. After 1 hour the derivatisation reagent was evaporated.  
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26 The dried residue was reconstituted in 75  $\mu\text{l}$  of iso-octane.  
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31  
32 The dried extracts containing  $\alpha/\beta$ -boldenone,  $\alpha/\beta$ -testosterone,  $\alpha/\beta$ -androsterone,  
33  
34 etiocholanolon, testosterone-D2 and  $\beta$ -boldenone-D3 were reconstituted in 50  $\mu\text{l}$  of  
35  
36 derivatisation reagent (HFBA/acetone) and incubated for one hour at 60°C. After 1 hour  
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38 the derivatisation reagent was evaporated. The dried residue was reconstituted in 50  $\mu\text{l}$   
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40 of iso-octane.  
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### 45 46 *Detection*

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48 Mass spectrometric detection was performed in selected ion monitoring (SIM) mode,  
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50 see Table 1 and 2 for an overview of the m/z monitored and typical retention times of  
51  
52 the analytes.  
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## 57 58 **Results**

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3 In Table 3 the results of our pilot study are presented. Unexpectedly and in contrast  
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5 with our hypothesis no traces of boldenone in the urine of any of the volunteers could  
6  
7 be detected. The levels of  $\beta$ -sitosterol, campesterol and stigmasterol were almost the  
8  
9 same over the 7 days of consumption of phytosterol enriched margarines. Also the  
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11 patient with sitosterolemia showed no traces of urinary boldenone. As expected, the  
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13 patient levels of  $\beta$ -sitosterol, campesterol and stigmasterol were elevated compared to  
14  
15 the mean levels of the female volunteers. Table 4 presents preliminary data on urinary  
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17 levels of  $\alpha$ -testosterone and  $\beta$ -testosterone, which showed a slight increase in  
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19 testosterone compared to baseline levels, after a few days of phytosterol-enriched  
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21 margarine consumption.  
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## Discussion

From our pilot we conclude that there is no evidence of formation of the anabolic steroid boldenone in women volunteers after consumption of the recommended amount (i.e. 25 grams per day) of phytosterol-enriched margarines. In addition, although the urinary sitosterol and stigmasterol levels in our sitosterolemia patient are elevated as expected, also no urinary boldenone in this positive control case could be detected. Therefore, within the PLM perspective of this study there seems no health hazard for women forming boldenone associated with this type of functional food.

In contrast to the clear results on the absence of urinary boldenone in both our human volunteers and in our sitosterolemia patient, the results on urinary testosterone are rather uncertain. At day 3 or 4 the ratio of  $\beta$ -testosterone and  $\alpha$ -testosterone seems to be high, but this value was influenced by one low concentration of  $\alpha$ -testosterone near the detection limit. The variation in these data is large and it should be demonstrated in future larger trials whether any shift in concentration is caused by true differences in human metabolic systems or by measurement errors.

Several (mechanistic) issues remain to be clarified in the future, especially in cattle consuming a large amount of phytosterol -rich feed. There is still debate about the implications of the detection of boldenone in cattle and veal calves' urine. Questions that are raised focus among others on whether boldenone is endogenously synthesized or indeed illegally administered. Also, detection methods might have been improved over time. Another theory that has been proposed is that due to bacteria in feed or a different feed composition (more sterols), the side chain at the c17 position in the D-ring can be broken and the sterols can be formed into anabolic steroids such as

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3 boldenone or testosterone. One should bear in mind that in human food we do not  
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5 expect this type of bacteria, but the implications for humans in the light of beef  
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7 consumption needs more research.  
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12 To our knowledge, this study is the first to investigate the association between  
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14 phytosterol ( $\beta$ -sitosterol) consumption and urinary boldenone concentration in humans.  
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16 And although our pilot study only aimed at hypothesis generation, we very well realize  
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18 that there are limitations to our pilot study. We had a limited number of participants  
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20 who only consumed the recommended dose of physterol-enriched margarine, during a  
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22 limited amount of time. But as the metabolic effects of physiological amounts of  
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24 phytosterol-enriched margarines are normally observed within one day (Ellegard and  
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26 others 2005) we are of the opinion that the duration of our pilot had been sufficiently  
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28 long. Within the scope of the hypothetical aim of this pilot, it was not necessary to  
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30 collect representative 24h urine samples to take into account variations in urine  
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32 volume. Therefore, spot urine samples were appropriate to investigate whether  
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34 boldenone is detectable in urine. Although no levels of boldenone were found, we are  
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36 of the opinion that in theory it would have been possible to detect sterols and  
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38 boldenone in human urine samples. Given a mean urine excretion of 1,5 l/day, a  
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40 phytosterol intake of 2 g/day, and a mean intestinal absorption of 2% (see introduction  
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42 section), the theoretical maximal concentration of sterols in urine is a factor 300 higher  
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44 ( $2\%$  of 2 g sterols = 40 mg/1,5 l =  $\sim 30$ mg/l) than the detection limit of 0.1  $\mu$ g/l. We did  
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46 not have any compliance measure of the phytosterol-enriched margarine consumption,  
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48 but we do not have any indications that among our 10 female volunteers who were  
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50 contacted regularly during the study period there were any non-compliant subjects.  
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3 Our main focus was the detection of urinary boldenone. Despite the limitations  
4 described above we conclude that within our setting consumption of the recommended  
5 amounts of phytosterol -enriched margarines, does not lead to detectable levels of the  
6 anabolic steroid boldenone in women. Further research on boldenone formation is  
7 dependent on the observations in cattle and veal calves in relation to beef and veal  
8 consumption. Also, the differences in the exact metabolic mechanisms between  
9 humans and cattle, and among humans themselves with regard to testosterone are  
10 topics of further research.  
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Table 1. Overview of the m/z of the different TMS-compounds measured.

Compound	m/z	Retention time (min.)
<b>Cholesterol</b>	368	13.08
<b>Campesterol</b>	382	13.43
<b>Sitosterol</b>	396	13.68
<b>Stigmasterol</b>	394	13.50
<b>Coprostanol</b>	370	12.66
<b>Cholesterol-D6</b>	374	13.08

Table 2. Overview of the m/z of the different (HFB) compounds measured.

Compound	m/z	Retention time (min.)
<b><math>\beta</math>-Boldenone</b>	678	12.97
<b>Boldenone-D3</b>	681	12.95
<b><math>\alpha</math>-Boldenone</b>	678	13.30
<b><math>\alpha</math>-testosterone</b>	680	12.81
<b><math>\beta</math>-testosterone</b>	680	13.29
<b>androsterone</b>	486	15.02
<b>etiocholanolone</b>	486	15.11
<b><math>\alpha</math>-androsteron</b>	486	15.83
<b>testosterone-D2</b>	682	13.28

Table 3. Urine levels of boldenone and phytosterols in 10 healthy human volunteers and a sitosterolemia patient

	Volunteers			Patient with sitosterolemia <sup>1</sup>
	Baseline	Day 3-4	Day 7	
<b><math>\beta</math>-boldenone (<math>\mu\text{g/l}</math>)</b>	nd	nd	nd	nd <sup>2</sup>
<b><math>\alpha</math>-boldenone (<math>\mu\text{g/l}</math>)</b>	nd	nd	nd	nd
<b>Campesterol (<math>\mu\text{g/l}</math>)</b>				
mean $\pm$ sd	0.8 $\pm$ 0.3	0.9 $\pm$ 0.4	0.9 $\pm$ 0.3	7.1
median (min-max)	0.7 (0.5-1.5)	0.8 (0.4-1.5)	1.0 (0.5-1.2)	
<b>Stigmasterol (<math>\mu\text{g/l}</math>)</b>				
mean $\pm$ sd	0.2 $\pm$ 0.2	0.1 $\pm$ 0.2	0.3 $\pm$ 0.3	1.5
median <sup>3</sup> (min-max)	-(0.0-0.5)	-(0.0-0.3)	-(0.0-0.5)	
<b><math>\beta</math>-sitosterol (<math>\mu\text{g/l}</math>)</b>				
mean $\pm$ sd	1.1 $\pm$ 0.6	0.9 $\pm$ 0.5	1.2 $\pm$ 0.4	13.5
median (min-max)	1.1 (0.5-2.4)	0.8 (0.5-1.9)	1.1 (0.6-1.9)	

<sup>1</sup> In this patient levels of boldenone and phytosterols were measured once

<sup>2</sup> nd: not detected below limit of detection: i.e. for campesterol, stigmasterol and  $\beta$ -sitosterol and boldenone  $< 0.1\mu\text{g/l}$

<sup>3</sup> not calculated due to statistical limitations

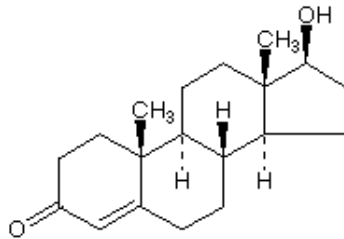
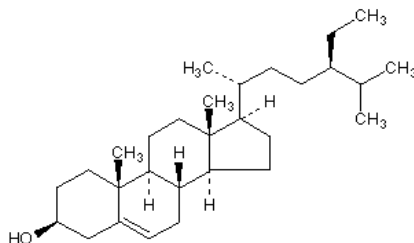
**Table 4. Urine levels of testosterone in 10 healthy human volunteers and a sitosterolemia patient**

	Volunteers			Patient with sitosterolemia <sup>1</sup>
	Baseline	Day 3-4	Day 7	
<b><math>\alpha</math>-testosterone (<math>\mu\text{g/l}</math>)</b>				
mean $\pm$ sd	1.5 $\pm$ 1.3	3.5 $\pm$ 4.1	3.3 $\pm$ 1.8	2.8
median (min-max)	0.9 (0.5-3.6)	3.2 (0.0-13.3)	3.5 (0.8-5.2)	
<b><math>\beta</math>- testosterone (<math>\mu\text{g/l}</math>)</b>				
mean $\pm$ sd	1.3 $\pm$ 0.4	3.2 $\pm$ 2.1	1.8 $\pm$ 0.7	0.1
median (min-max)	1.2 (0.8-1.9)	2.8 (0.8-7.0)	1.9 (1.0-2.7)	
<b>Ratio</b>				
<b><math>\beta</math>- testosterone/ <math>\alpha</math>- testosterone</b>				
mean $\pm$ sd	1.2 $\pm$ 0.6	1.4 $\pm$ 1.0 <sup>2</sup>	0.9 $\pm$ 0.8	-
median (min-max)	1.0 (0.5-2.1)	1.2 (0.3-2.7)	0.5 (0.2-2.3)	

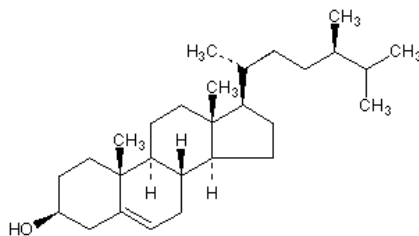
<sup>1</sup> In this patient levels of testosterone were measured once

<sup>2</sup> Mean ratio is 23.2 if one person with values near detection limit is included.

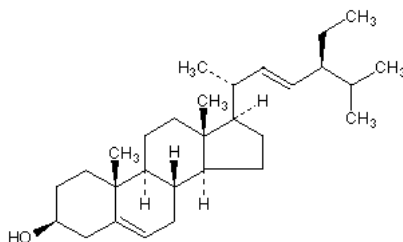
a. Testosterone

b.  $\beta$ -sitosterol

c. Campesterol



d. Stigmasterol



e. Boldenone

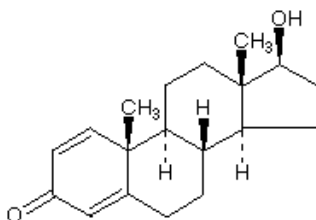


Figure 1. Structures of a. testosterone, b.  $\beta$ -sitosterol, c. campesterol, d. stigmasterol and e. boldenone