



Patient and Caregiver Information on Anticonvulsant Mood Stabilizers

The name of your medication is _____.

What is this drug used for?

Anticonvulsants are used to treat seizure disorders as well as certain pain syndromes (e.g., trigeminal neuralgia – carbamazepine; migraines – valproate).

They can also be used to treat symptoms of acute mania and in the long-term control or prevention of bipolar depression. These drugs have also been found to be useful in the treatment of several other conditions, including: Add-on therapy with antidepressants to treat depression, add-on therapy with antipsychotics to treat schizophrenia, withdrawal reactions from alcohol or sedatives/hypnotics, and in behavior disturbances such as chronic aggression, impulsivity or irritability of autism. Ask your doctor if you are not sure why you are taking this drug.

Note: These medications may not have formal approval by regulatory agencies such as Health Canada or the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for use in children or adolescents for some or all of the above uses.

How does your doctor decide on the dosage?

The dose of the medication is different for every patient and is based on the amount of drug in the blood (for some of these drugs) as well as your response to treatment. You may initially take your medication two or three times a day; after several weeks, your doctor may decide to prescribe the drug once daily if extended release forms are available.

How often will you need to have blood levels done with carbamazepine and valproate?

Your doctor will measure the drug level in the blood on a regular basis during the first few months until the dose is stable. Thereafter, drug levels will be done at least once a year or whenever there is a change in drug therapy.

What do the blood levels mean?

The carbamazepine level that is usually found to be effective for most patients is between 17 and 50 micromol/L (4–12 micrograms/mL). The valproate level that is usually found to be effective for most patients is between 350 and 875 micromol/L (50–125 micrograms/mL).

On the morning of your blood test, take the morning dose of your medication **after** the test to avoid inaccurate results.

Blood levels usually do not need to be tested if you are taking lamotrigine, topiramate or gabapentin.

How quickly will the drug start working?

Control of manic symptoms or stabilization of mood may require up to 14 days of treatment or longer. Because these medications

need time to work, **do not decrease or increase the dose or stop the medication** without discussing this with your doctor. Improvement in seizures and pain symptoms as well as aggression/impulsivity also occur gradually.

How long should you take this medication?

This depends on what type of illness you have and how well you do. Following the first episode of mania it is usually recommended that these drugs be continued for a minimum of 1 year; this decreases the chance of having another episode. Your doctor may then decrease the drug slowly and monitor for any symptoms; if none occur, the drug can gradually be stopped. For individuals who have had several or severe episodes of mania or depression, medication may need to be continued indefinitely. Long-term treatment is generally recommended for recurring depression, seizure disorder, and aggression/impulsivity.

What side effects may happen?

Side effects may happen with any drug. They are not usually serious and do not happen to everyone. Side effects may sometimes occur before beneficial effects of the medication are noticed. If you think you may be having a side effect, speak to your doctor or pharmacist as they can help you decrease it or cope with it.

Common side effects that should be reported to your doctor at the **NEXT VISIT** include:

- Feeling sleepy, tired, difficulty concentrating – this problem usually goes away with time. Use of other drugs that make you drowsy will worsen the problem. Avoid driving a car or operating machinery if drowsiness persists.
- Dizziness – get up from a lying or sitting position slowly; dangle your legs over the edge of the bed for a few minutes before getting up. Sit or lie down if dizziness persists or if you feel faint – then call your doctor.
- Problems with balance or unsteadiness – discuss this with your doctor as this may require a change in your dosage.
- Blurred vision – this usually happens when you first start the drug and tends to be temporary. Reading under a bright light or at a distance may help; a magnifying glass can be of temporary use. If the problem lasts for more than a few weeks, let your doctor know.
- Dry mouth – sour candy and sugarless gum help increase saliva in your mouth. Do not drink sugar-containing drinks as they may give you cavities and increase your weight. Drink water and brush your teeth regularly.
- Nausea or heartburn – if this happens, take the medication with food. If vomiting or diarrhea occur and last for more than 24 hours, call your doctor.
- Muscle tremor – speak to your doctor as this may require a change in your dosage.
- Changes in hair texture, hair loss (valproate).
- Changes in your menstrual cycle (valproate).
- For adolescents: changes in sex drive or sexual performance – discuss this with your doctor.

- Weight/appetite changes – watch the type of food you eat; avoid foods with high fat or sugar content (e.g., cakes and pastry).
- Periods of hyperventilation or rapid breathing.

Rare side effects you should report to your doctor **RIGHT AWAY** include:

- Sore mouth, gums or throat, mouth ulcers or sores
- Skin rash or itching, swelling of the face, skin blistering or crusting (especially with carbamazepine and lamotrigine)
- Severe stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite
- Feeling tired, weak, feverish or like you have the flu
- Feeling confused or disoriented or having trouble finding the right words you want to say
- Easy bruising, bleeding, appearance of splotchy purplish darkening of the skin
- Yellowing of the skin or eyes; dark-colored urine (pee)
- Uncomfortable tingling sensations in fingers or toes
- Unusual eye movements
- Sudden blurring of vision and/or painful or red eyes
- Feeling very dizzy or falling/fainting
- Severe agitation, restlessness, irritability, or thoughts of suicide

Let your doctor know **right away** if you miss your period or think you may be **pregnant**, plan to become pregnant, or are breastfeeding.

What should you do if you forget to take a dose of your medication?

If you take your total dose of medication in the morning or at bedtime and you forget to take it for more than 6 hours, skip the missed dose and continue with your schedule the next day. **DO NOT DOUBLE THE DOSE.** If you take the drug several times a day, take the missed dose when you remember, then continue with your regular schedule.

Is this drug safe to take with other medication?

Because these drugs can change the effect of other medication or may be affected by other medication, always check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking other drugs, including those you can buy without a prescription such as cold remedies and herbal preparations. Always inform any doctor or dentist that you see that you are taking this drug.

Precautions/considerations

1. Do not change your dose or stop the drug suddenly without speaking with your doctor, as this may result in withdrawal symptoms such as anxiety, irritability, and changes in mood.
2. These drugs may impair the mental and physical abilities and reaction time required for driving a car or operating other machinery. Avoid these activities if you feel drowsy or slowed down.
3. This drug may increase the effects of alcohol, making you more sleepy, dizzy, and lightheaded. If taken together with alcohol, this may make it dangerous for you to drive, operate machinery, or perform tasks that require careful attention.
4. Report any changes in mood or behavior to your doctor.

What else do I need to know about anticonvulsants?

1. Avoid drinking grapefruit juice while on *carbamazepine* as it can change the amount of carbamazepine in your body.
2. If you are on *liquid carbamazepine*, do not mix it with any other liquid medication.
3. The liquid form of *valproic acid* should not be mixed with carbonated beverages, such as soda pop; this may cause an unpleasant taste or mouth irritation.
4. Unless you are prescribed a chewable tablet, capsules or tablets should be swallowed whole; do not break, chew or crush them; chewing capsules can cause irritation in the mouth and throat; extended-release capsules can be opened and sprinkled on food.
5. *Gabapentin* should not be taken within 2 hours of an antacid (e.g., Tums, Rolaids, Maalox).
6. If you are taking *topiramate*, drink plenty of fluids before and during activities such as exercise or exposure to warm temperatures. Avoid the regular use of antacids (e.g., Tums, Maalox).
7. To treat occasional pain, avoid the use of ASA (aspirin and related products) if you are taking *divalproex* or *valproic acid*, as it can be harmful to children, and may affect the amount of this drug in your body. Acetaminophen (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil) are safer alternatives.
8. On the morning when blood is drawn for an anticonvulsant level, withhold your morning dose of the drug until after the blood draw.
9. Store your medication in a clean, dry area at room temperature. Keep all medication out of the reach of children.

If you have any questions regarding this medication, please ask your doctor, pharmacist, or nurse.