

VALPROATE ('Epilim', 'Depakote', 'Convulex')

Val – pro – ate

Why have I been prescribed valproate?

Valproate is usually used to help treat mood swings, as happens in bipolar affective disorder or manic depression. People with bipolar affective disorder have mood swings that are much more severe than the small changes in mood that everybody experiences. With bipolar affective disorder, mood may be elevated or depressed (up or down).

When the mood is extremely elevated this is called hypomania or mania. People with hypomania feel very energetic and elated but can be irritable and frustrated. They may talk very quickly, sleep very little and be full of ideas and plans. They can be described as being "high". Treatment is usually needed because when people are "high" they may make poor judgements and can quickly become exhausted. Periods of depression will also occur in bipolar disorder. Symptoms include feelings of sadness, tiredness and poor sleep. Antidepressants may be required to help lessen these obviously unpleasant symptoms. Valproate helps stabilise the mood and helps reduce the highs.

Valproate is also an anticonvulsant, used to help manage epileptic fits or seizures.

What exactly is valproate?

Valproate can be described as an anticonvulsant, antimanic or mood stabiliser. It is unclear exactly how it works. Valproate is available in a number of similar forms, either sodium valproate or valproic acid:

'Depakote' is a mixture of sodium valproate and valproic acid known as valproate semisodium (or divalproex in USA)

'Epilim' contains sodium valproate

'Epilim Chrono' is a mixture of sodium valproate and valproic acid

'Convulex' contains valproic acid.

These are very similar, but it is always best to make sure you get the same one from your pharmacist.

Why do I need to have some blood tests?

The first blood test is to check that it's safe for you to take valproate. Your liver must be healthy. After a few weeks, you may need another blood test. This will tell your doctor if you are taking the right dose of valproate for you. You may only need blood tests for the first six months of your treatment.

Is valproate safe to take?

It is usually safe to have valproate regularly as prescribed by your doctor, but it doesn't suit everyone. Let your doctor know if any of the following apply to you, as extra care may be needed:

- if you are diabetic, have porphyria, SLE, or suffer from kidney or liver trouble or your family has a history of liver trouble;
- if you are taking any other medication. This includes medicine from your pharmacist, such as aspirin or cimetidine ('Tagamet');
- if you are pregnant, breast feeding, or wish to become pregnant.

What is the usual dose of valproate?

The starting dose of sodium valproate (e.g. 'Epilim') is usually between 400mg to 600mg a day. The maintenance dose can vary from 400mg to 2500mg a day. The maximum dose of sodium valproate is 2500mg a day.

For valproate semisodium ('Depakote'), the starting dose is usually 250mg three times a day. The maintenance dose is usually 1000mg to 2000mg a day.

How should I take valproate?

Look at the label on your medicine; it should have all the necessary instructions on it. Follow this advice carefully. If you have any questions, speak to your doctor or pharmacist. Most medicines are now dispensed with an information leaflet for you to read.

What should I do if I miss a dose?

Never change your dose without checking with your doctor. If you forget a dose, take it as soon as you remember, as long as it is within a few hours of the usual time.

What will happen to me when I start taking valproate?

For most people with bipolar affective disorder highs and lows occur quite rarely. Valproate should make these highs and lows less extreme or less frequent. So, it may take months or years to see the full beneficial effects of valproate. The best way to know whether it is working for you is to compare your highs and low before and whilst taking it.

Unfortunately, you might get some side effects before your mood gets any better. Most of these side effects should go away after a few weeks. Sometimes, the level of valproate in your body gets too high which can be dangerous. You need to

be able to spot the side effects that can mean a high level of valproate. Look at the table below. It tells you what to do if you get any side effects. Not everyone will get the side effects shown. There are many other possible side effects. Ask your pharmacist, doctor or nurse if you are worried about anything else that you think might be a side effect.

| Side effect | What is it? | What should I do if it happens to me? |
|---|--|--|
| COMMON | | |
| GASTRIC IRRITATION or NAUSEA | Feeling sick. You have an upset stomach. This usually happens at the start of treatment. | Take your valproate with or after food. If it is bad, contact your doctor. The slow-release tablets may help. |
| UNCOMMON | | |
| INCREASE IN APPETITE and WEIGHT GAIN | Eating more and putting on weight. | Avoid fatty foods like chocolate, crisps and fizzy drinks. A diet full of vegetables and fibre will usually help, as will physical activities such as walking. If it becomes a problem or you are worried, ask to see a dietician. |
| RARE | | |
| ATAXIA | Being very unsteady on your feet. | Your valproate dose may be too high. Contact your doctor now. |
| CONFUSION | Your mind is all mixed up. | Your valproate dose may be too high. Contact your doctor now. |
| DROWSINESS | Feeling sleepy or sluggish. This usually happens early in treatment and should go away. | Don't drive or use machinery. Ask your doctor if you can take your valproate at a different time. |
| HAIR LOSS | Some of your hair falls out and may seem thinner. This stops after a while. It may regrow curly. | Discuss this with your doctor. |
| IMPAIRED LIVER FUNCTION | Your liver is not working very well. You may feel sleepy, be sick, lose your appetite and your skin may look yellow. | Stop taking valproate and see your doctor as soon as possible. |
| TREMOR | Feeling shaky. | This may be due to the dose of valproate you are taking. Discuss this with your doctor. |
| VERY RARE | | |
| RASH | A rash seen anywhere on the skin. | Stop taking valproate and contact your doctor now. |
| THROMBOCYTOPENIA and IMPAIRED PLATELET FUNCTION | Low numbers of platelets in your blood. The platelets that are there may not work very well. You may bruise without reason and bleed easily. | Stop taking valproate and see your doctor now. |

What about alcohol?

It is officially recommended that people taking valproate should not drink alcohol. This is because both valproate and alcohol can cause drowsiness. If the two are taken at the same time, severe drowsiness can result. This can lead to falls or accidents. As well as this, drinking alcohol often makes your mood unstable. Excessive drinking is especially likely to do this. Once people are used to taking medication, they can sometimes drink alcohol in small amounts without any harm. Avoid alcohol altogether for the first one or two months. After this, if you want a drink, try a glass of your normal drink and see how you feel. If this doesn't make you feel drowsy, then it is probably OK to drink small amounts. It pays to be very cautious because alcohol affects people in different ways, especially when they are taking medication.

Don't stop taking your medication because you fancy a drink at the weekend. If you do drink alcohol, drink only small amounts. Never drink any alcohol and drive while on valproate. Discuss any concerns you may have with your pharmacist, doctor or nurse.

When I feel better, can I stop taking valproate?

No. If you stop taking valproate, your original symptoms may return. You should decide with your doctor when you can come off it. Most people need to be on valproate for quite a long time, sometimes years. This is not usually harmful. Valproate is not addictive.

Remember, leaflets like this can only describe some of the effects of medication. You may find other books or leaflets also useful. If you have access to the internet you may find a lot of information there as well, but be careful, as internet based information is not always accurate.



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