

Gabapentin

What is gabapentin?

Gabapentin (Neurontin®, generics available) is a medication that was originally developed to treat seizures, but now is commonly used for a number of other medical conditions, including the treatment of chronic pain.



Exactly how gabapentin works in alcohol dependence is not known, but it is thought to help normalize brain chemicals that have been disturbed by alcohol dependence.

Based on new research findings, gabapentin is now beginning to be used outside of its currently approved indications (“off label”) to treat alcohol dependence.

Gabapentin can help you:

- stop drinking alcohol
- manage cravings, sleep and mood
- have less heavy drinking days and/or have less drinks per week, if you drink.

How is gabapentin taken?

The gabapentin dose is increased gradually to minimize side-effects while the body gets used to the medication. The recommended dose is typically reached within one to two weeks. Take your dose every day, even if you are doing well with your drinking goals.

Doses may start at 300 mg twice daily and go up to 600 mg three times daily, depending on your response.



What are the side-effects of gabapentin?

Generally, gabapentin is fairly well tolerated. Reported side-effects include:

- dizziness (17–28%)
- drowsiness (19–21%)
- fatigue (11%)
- headache (3%)
- diarrhea (3%)
- weight gain (2–3%)
- cough (2%)
- blurred vision (3–4%)
- constipation (1–4%)
- dry mouth (2–5%)
- skin rash (1%).

Is it possible to become addicted to gabapentin?

It is common for your body to become used to this medication. Like many other medications, starting and stopping gabapentin should be done gradually. Overall, developing addiction to gabapentin is rare. Your health care team will work with you to assess your individual risk and monitor you on an ongoing basis.

What will happen if I drink alcohol while taking gabapentin?

Gabapentin can be sedating. Therefore, combining this medication with alcohol is not recommended and can lead to increased impairment.



Gabapentin does NOT:

- affect your blood alcohol level or “sober you up” if you drink
- change the way your body breaks down alcohol, so it will not make you feel sick (e.g., vomit) if you drink.

Can I take other medications with gabapentin?

Gabapentin has relatively few drug interactions. Gabapentin can have additive effects with other sedating medications (e.g., opioids, benzodiazepines).

You should discuss any prescription or over-the-counter products and natural health products you are currently taking with your physician and pharmacist so that possible interactions can be evaluated.

What will happen if I become pregnant while taking gabapentin?

If you become pregnant while taking gabapentin, let your physician know immediately so that plans can be made for treatment during your pregnancy.

Based on current information, gabapentin use in pregnant women does not appear to increase the risk of major malformations compared to women not taking gabapentin.

As with all anti-seizure medications, it is recommended that women take 5 mg of folic acid prior to and during their first trimester if they are taking gabapentin.

Should I take gabapentin with a meal?

Gabapentin can be taken with or without food. Some people like to time their dose with meals to help them remember to take the medication. If you find that it is causing you stomach upset, you can take it with a meal.

What happens if I miss a dose?

If you miss a dose, take it as soon as you think about it. If it is close to the time of your next dose, skip the missed dose and go back to your normal time. Do not take two doses at the same time or extra doses.

What happens if I stop taking gabapentin suddenly?

Gabapentin should be gradually tapered when the decision is made to stop the medication. An abrupt stop, especially from a high dose, can put you at risk of a seizure.

If I take gabapentin, does it mean that I don't need other treatments for alcohol dependence?

No. Research shows that alcohol dependence treatment is most effective when medications are combined with counselling and/or mutual support groups.

What is the relationship of gabapentin to AA and other mutual support groups?



You can participate in support groups while taking gabapentin. If other group members caution against taking any medications, you should refer them to the pamphlet “The AA Member—Medications and Other Drugs,” which states that AA members should not “play doctor” and advise others on medication provided by legitimate, informed medical practitioners or treatment programs.

Cost

As with all medications, cost depends on many things, including medication dose, pharmacy dispensing fee and days supplied.

Example: 30-day supply of 1800 mg daily at an average pharmacy is approximately \$90. This works out to about \$3 per day.

If you have insurance through a third party or through the Ontario Drug Benefit Program, your out-of-pocket payment will probably be much less.