

Valproate (say: val-pro-ate)



What is valproate?

- Valproate is the name of the active part of sodium valproate (Epilim[®], Episenta[®]), valproic acid (Convulex[®]) and semisodium valproate (Depakote[®])
- It comes as tablets, capsules, crushable tablets, a sugar-free liquid, a syrup, granules and injection.

Please note: Valproate is often used in adults but it is not "licensed" or officially approved for people under 18 for mood problems. This is because it has not been fully studied in this younger age group for mood problems. If you are under 18 you may be offered this medicine because we have experience of it and we know it helps adults. If you wish to know more please ask for a copy of our "Unlicensed uses of licensed medicines" fact sheet.

What does valproate help?

- Valproate is usually used to help treat the symptoms of bipolar mood disorder (especially mania) and epilepsy e.g. it can help stop people having seizures or fits
- It is also used to help the symptoms of bipolar depression and some other conditions.



How and when should I take valproate?

- Swallow the tablets with at least half a glass of water whilst sitting or standing. This is to make sure that they reach the stomach and do not stick in your throat
- For the liquid, use a medicine spoon, dropper or oral syringe
- Episenta[®] capsules can be emptied onto cold food or drink and swallowed straight away without chewing, as can the granules
- Taking it at mealtimes may make it easier for you to remember as there is no problem about taking valproate with or after food. If the label says to take it once a day this is usually best at bedtime as it may make you drowsy at first.



How long will I have to wait before it works?

- This will depend on what you are taking it for
- The effect usually starts in a week or so, and builds over several weeks.



How long will I need to keep taking valproate for?

- This will depend on what you are taking it for
- It may be for several months or years.

Can I stop taking valproate suddenly?

- It is better not to do this without talking it over first with other people e.g. your relatives or your prescriber, nurse, pharmacist or other healthcare professional
- It normally works out much better if you stop medicines in a planned way at a time when your stress levels are lower, rather than e.g. at exam times, mid-winter and life events
- Your symptoms can return if treatment is stopped too early. This may occur some days, weeks or even months after valproate has been stopped
- When the time comes, you should withdraw valproate by a gradual drop in the dose over several weeks.

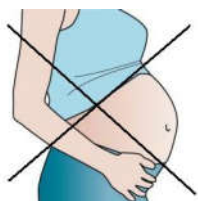


What should I do if I forget to take a dose of valproate at the right time?

- Take the missed dose as soon as you can unless it's within about 4 hours of your next dose
- If you remember after this just take the next dose as normal
- Do not try to catch up by taking two doses at once as you may get more side-effects.

Can I cycle or drive while I am taking valproate?

- You may feel a bit light-headed at first when taking valproate
- Until this wears off, or you know how valproate affects you, be careful cycling and, if you are old enough, do not drive or operate machinery.



What about becoming pregnant?

- **Don't!** If you are a female taking valproate who *could* become pregnant (however unlikely) you **must** be on the "Valproate Pregnancy Protection Programme" ('Prevent') and take fully effective contraception the whole time you are taking valproate
- If you unexpectedly find you are pregnant do not panic, do not stop taking the valproate, but see your doctor **straight away**, in the next day
- You will almost certainly need to switch to something else, at least during pregnancy
- You also need to think about the risks of becoming ill again.

What sort of side-effects might I get with valproate?

Very common (more than about 1 in 10 people might get these)



Weight gain.

- Eating more, putting on weight
 - A diet full of cereal, vegetables and fibre may help prevent weight gain
- Ask to see our fact sheets on weight and metabolic syndrome.

Common (fewer than about 1 in 10 people might get these)



Hair loss

- Some of your hair may fall out and may seem thinner
- This stops after a while
- Discuss with your prescriber
- Sometimes it grows back curly.



Feeling sick or being sick, or stomach pain

- Taking it after food may help
- It usually wears off in a few weeks
- If not, tell your prescriber.

Uncommon (fewer than about 1 in 100 people might get these)



Fatigue and sleepiness

- You feel tired or sleepy
- This may happen early on in treatment and usually wears off
- If you feel like this for more than a week after starting, tell your prescriber
- It may be possible to adjust your dose slightly.



Fatigue.

- You feel tired all the time.
- This may happen early on in treatment and usually wears off
- If you feel like this for more than a week after starting valproate, tell your prescriber
- It may be possible to adjust your dose slightly.



Confusion

- Your mind is all mixed up
- Your dose may be too high
- Contact your prescriber now.



Ataxia

- This is where you feel unsteady on your feet
- Your dose may be too high
- Talk to your prescriber.

See your doctor if you get any of these rare side effects:



Jaundice

- Pain just under the ribs, looking a bit yellow, and feeling sick
- Stop taking valproate and contact your prescriber straight away, don't delay.



Skin rash.

- This can be a rash or itching seen anywhere on the skin
- If this happens, stop taking your valproate and contact your prescriber now.



Thoughts of harming yourself

- Feeling anxious, restless, poor sleep and feeling you might want to harm yourself
- See your doctor in the next day



Pancreatitis

- Being sick or sudden stomach pain
- See your prescriber straight away
- The risk drops the older you get.



Bruising or bleeding easily

- This can be a sign of something more serious.
- You may not have enough platelets in your blood
- Stop taking valproate and see your prescriber straight away for a blood test.

This table shows some of the most common side effects and any you might need to take action on. You must also see the maker's Patient Information Leaflet for the full list of possible side effects but do not be worried by this. Some people get no side effects at all. Some side effects are the brain getting used to a medicine and these usually wear off in a few days or weeks. Starting slower may help. If you think you might have a side effect to this medicine, you should ask your prescriber, pharmacist or other healthcare professional.

The small print: This leaflet is to help you understand about your medicine. You must also read the manufacturer's Patient Information Leaflet (PIL). You may find more on the internet but beware as internet-based information is not always accurate. Do not share medicines with anyone else. The 'Handy charts' will help you compare the main medicines for each condition, how they work and their side effects. Go to our website for fuller answers to these and many other questions.

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