

Naltrexone (Nal-TREX-own)

Patient Information - Hillmorton Hospital Pharmacy

Why have I been prescribed naltrexone?

Naltrexone is designed to help reduce your desire for alcohol. This medicine can help to maintain abstinence by reducing the “cravings” that people can get with alcohol dependence. Naltrexone can also interfere with the urge to drink more even if you have had a drink. Studies have demonstrated that it is a helpful medicine to use in combination with relapse prevention treatment (e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous).



What exactly is naltrexone?

Naltrexone is a medicine which blocks the opiate centres in the brain. It is not fully understood how naltrexone works to reduce the cravings of alcohol, but some scientists believe it works by affecting pathways in the brain where the neurotransmitter dopamine is found. This leads to three main effects.

- First, naltrexone can reduce “cravings” (the urge or desire to drink).
- Second, naltrexone helps you remain abstinent.
- Third, naltrexone may interfere with the tendency to want to drink more if you have had a drink.

Is naltrexone safe to take?

It is usually safe to take naltrexone regularly as prescribed by your doctor, but it may not be suitable for everyone. Let your doctor or pharmacist know if you have the following, as extra care may be needed:

- If you have an allergy to naltrexone or any of the other ingredients.
- If you are taking opiate (e.g. codeine, morphine, oxycodone, tramadol) medication or are currently dependent on them.
- If you are going through opiate withdrawal.
- If you have a medical condition that requires the use of opiate medication.
- If you have liver failure or acute hepatitis.
- If you are currently pregnant or breastfeeding.

Naltrexone will not make you feel high and is not addictive.

How should I take naltrexone and what should I do if I miss a dose?

Look at the label on your medicines. It should have all the necessary instructions on it. Follow this advice carefully. If you have any questions, speak to your doctor or pharmacist. Naltrexone should be swallowed with a glass of water.

You must not have had any opiate medication for seven to ten days prior to starting this medication. Your doctor may perform tests which will see if you are free from these medicines before starting naltrexone. The dose of your medicine may be titrated up slowly therefore it is important to follow your doctor's instructions carefully. Do not stop taking naltrexone without consulting your doctor. If you miss a dose, take it as soon as remembered, do not take it if it is near the time of the next dose, instead skip the missed dose and resume your usual dosing schedule. Do not 'double-up' the next dose to catch up.

What will happen to me when I start taking my naltrexone and I decide to drink alcohol?

The effects of naltrexone in helping you remain abstinent and avoid relapse to alcohol use also occur early after first use. Naltrexone will not cause an unpleasant reaction if you drink alcohol. Some people say that it changes the taste of alcohol. Naltrexone will not stop you getting drunk if you drink. It does not reduce the effects of alcohol that impair coordination and judgement.

Are there any medicines that I should avoid or take care with?

The major effect of naltrexone is on opioid medicines (e.g. codeine, morphine, oxycodone, tramadol). This class of medicines are used to treat pain. Naltrexone can block the effect of these medicines. Tell your doctor if you are taking painkillers and they can prescribe non-opiate painkillers which can be used effectively while you are on naltrexone. If you are having surgery (including dental surgery) tell the doctor or dentist that you are taking naltrexone.

Naltrexone is likely to have little impact on other medicines commonly used such as antibiotics, non-opioid painkillers (e.g. aspirin, paracetamol, ibuprofen), and allergy medications.

You should inform your doctor of all medicines you are currently taking so that possible interactions can be evaluated (including over-the-counter medications).

When I feel better, can I stop taking Naltrexone?

No, naltrexone is usually prescribed for a set period of time to help you remain abstinent from alcohol. Do not decrease or increase the dose without discussing this with your doctor.

Medical alert

Your condition can cause complications in a medical emergency. It is recommended that you carry medical identification stating you are taking this medication so that appropriate treatment can be given in a medical emergency.

Side Effects	What is it?	What should I do if this happens to me?
Very common		
Nausea, Vomiting and Abdominal Pain	Feeling sick, throwing up and having a sore stomach.	Taking each dose with or after food may help. If it is severe, contact your doctor.
Feeling Tired or Drowsy	Lacking energy, feeling tired, feeling run down.	The problem 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.
Headache	Pain in or around the head. Feeling of a tight band around the head. Pain may be all over head or may be in one particular region. Headache and nausea may also occur concurrently.	Temporary use of non-opioid pain medication (e.g. aspirin, paracetamol, ibuprofen) may be helpful. Contact your doctor if headaches occur frequently or are “troubling”.
Joint and Muscle Pain or Stiffness	Aching muscles or joints.	Temporary use of non-opioid pain medication (e.g. aspirin, paracetamol, ibuprofen) may be helpful.
Nervousness and Anxiety	The feeling of being on edge with worries interrupting your functioning.	You may feel nervous for a few days after starting this medication.
Problems Sleeping	You can't get to sleep. If you get to sleep you find that you are may only be able to sleep for a few hours and wake up still tired.	You may have problems sleeping when you start this medication. This may last a few days. If this problem continues to occur past a few days see your doctor.
Palpitations	A fast heartbeat.	It is not usually dangerous but talk to your doctor.
Common		
Loss of appetite	Not feeling hungry or wanting to eat	If you experience this for more than a few days you may need to see your doctor.
Increased Sweating and/or Watery/Teary Eyes	Feeling excessively sweaty. You may find that your eyes are filled with tears frequently.	Mention this to your doctor on your next visit. If this becomes overly problematic see your doctor.

Side Effects	What is it?	What should I do if this happens to me?
Increased Thirst	Feeling excessively thirsty	Try and avoid drinks that contain sugar or high calories. Water is the best drink. Brush your teeth twice a day with fluoride toothpaste. Try sugar free chewing gum to stimulate saliva flow in your mouth. If this becomes overly problematic talk to your doctor.
Urinary Retention	Difficulty in passing urine, or not much urine is passed.	Contact your doctor now.
Sexual Dysfunction	Lack of libido. No interest in sex. Inability to maintain an erection or have an orgasm.	Discuss this with your doctor when you next meet.
Diarrhoea or Constipation	If your bowel habits become more or less frequent than usual.	If this continues for a few days. See your doctor.
Dizziness and/or Vertigo	Feeling light-headed and faint.	Don't stand up too quickly. Try and sit or lie down when you feel it coming on. Don't drive.
Uncommon		
Depression	Feeling low in mood. Starting to lose pleasure in day to day activities. Feeling tired or rundown.	Contact your doctor immediately.
Rare		
Liver Damage	Your liver is not working as normal. You may not feel any symptoms. This may only be discovered if your doctor does a blood test.	Continue to take your naltrexone. If you notice any dark urine or yellowing of the skin or eyes (jaundice) stop this medication and speak to your doctor immediately.

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

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