

Valproate—(‘Epilim’) Val-pro-ate

Patient Information - Hillmorton Hospital Pharmacy

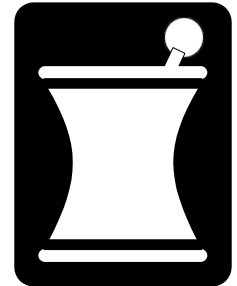
Why have I been prescribed valproate?

Valproate is 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 everyone 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. Occasionally, antidepressants are used to help overcome these feelings. Valproate helps stabilise the mood and helps even out the highs and the lows.

Valproate is also an anticonvulsant and is used to help treat epileptic fits or seizures.



What exactly is valproate?

Valproate can be described as an anticonvulsant, or mood stabiliser. It is unclear exactly how it works. Valproate is also known as Epilim™.

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 the doctor if you are taking the right dose of valproate for you. You will need to have blood tests every six months while taking valproate.

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 pregnant, breast feeding or wish to become pregnant.

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

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.

Only remove the tablet from the foil when you are ready to take it as the medicine absorbs water quickly. The tablet must be swallowed whole and should be taken with food. Never change your dose or stop taking your tablets 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 my valproate?

For most people with bipolar affective disorder, highs and lows occur infrequently, so, it may take months or years to appreciate the beneficial effects of valproate. The best way to know whether valproate is working for you is to compare your highs and lows before and whilst taking it.

Some people may get some side effects before they start to feel better. Most of these should go away after a few weeks. Sometimes the amount 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 overleaf. 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.

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

Always consult with your doctor or pharmacist before starting a new medicine or purchasing medicines over the counter. Valproate can interact with other medicines. Antacids, calcium salts or iron and ascorbic acid (Vitamin C) can decrease the effects of valproate when they are taken together.

When I feel better, can I stop taking it?

You should never stop taking valproate suddenly. 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.

What about alcohol?

It is 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 occur. 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 okay 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. Discuss any concerns you may have with your doctor, pharmacist or nurse.

If you do drink alcohol, drink only small amounts. Never drink any alcohol and drive.

What are the risks of taking valproate during pregnancy?

Risks to your unborn child.

If you take valproate when you are pregnant it can harm your unborn child. The risks are higher with valproate than with other medicines used to treat bipolar affective disorder. The risks are there whatever dose of valproate you take, and the higher the dose the higher the risk.

How could my child be harmed?

Taking valproate whilst pregnant can harm your child in two ways – it can cause birth defects and problems with development and learning.

Taking valproate whilst pregnant can cause serious birth defects.

In women who take valproate while pregnant, around 10-20 babies in every 100 will have a birth defect depending on the dose taken. In women who don't have bipolar affective disorder, 2-3 babies in every 100 will have a birth defect.

Birth defects seen when mothers take valproate during pregnancy include:

- Spina bifida (where the bones of the spine do not develop properly)
- Facial and skull malformations (including cleft lip and palate, where the upper lip or facial bones are split)
- Malformations of the limbs, heart, kidney, urinary tract and sexual organs.

If you take valproate while you are pregnant, it could affect your child's development as they grow up.

In women who take valproate while pregnant, about 30–40 children in every 100 may have developmental problems. The long-term effects are not known.

The effects on development can include:

- Being late in learning to walk and talk.
- Lower intelligence than other children of the same age.
- Poor speech and language skills.
- Memory problems.

Children exposed to valproate in the womb are more likely to have autism or autistic spectrum disorders.

There is also some evidence children may be more likely to be at risk of developing symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

When you first start valproate your doctor should explain all the known risks and why they feel that valproate is the right medicine for you.

If you are too young to become pregnant, it is still important that you and your parents know about these risks so you know what to do when you are old enough to have children.

If you are already old enough to become pregnant, it is important that you always use an effective method of contraception throughout your treatment. This is important to make sure you don't have an unplanned pregnancy. If you decide you want to start a family, talk to your doctor about this as soon as possible and do not stop your medicine or stop using contraception until you have been able to discuss this with your doctor. You and your doctor should agree a plan to reduce the risks before you start trying for a baby.

What are the risks to new-born's if the father takes valproate?

A recent study has indicated that there may be a higher risk of mental and physical development issues in children whose fathers were treated with valproate at time of conception.

In fathers who were taking valproate, around 5 - 6 babies in every 100 were later observed to have a neurodevelopmental disorder (see below). This is compared to 3 - 4 in every 100 babies in the group who were not on valproate but were taking some other medications for epilepsy. There have been other studies published that do not support this finding.

Neurodevelopmental disorders can include attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, intellectual disability, autism, movement or communication disorders.

Further investigation is needed but it is important that you talk to your doctor if you plan to start trying for a baby to discuss the potential risks and if there are alternative treatments available for you. We would also recommend that you use an effective method of contraception throughout your treatment. This is important to make sure you don't have an unplanned pregnancy.

If you decide you want to start a family, talk to your doctor about this as soon as possible, before you start trying for a baby. Do not stop your valproate or stop using contraception until you have discussed this with your doctor.

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 but be careful as internet-based information is not always accurate.

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Reference: <https://www.medicines.org.uk/emc/RMM.421.pdf>

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| SIDE EFFECT | WHAT IS IT? | WHAT SHOULD I DO IF THIS HAPPENS TO ME? |
|--------------------------------------|---|--|
| Common | | |
| Gastric irritation or Nausea | Feeling sick. You have an upset stomach. This usually happens at the start of the treatment. | Take your valproate with or after food. If it is bad, contact your doctor. |
| Uncommon | | |
| Increase in Appetite and Weight Gain | Eating more and putting on weight. | Avoid fizzy drinks and fatty foods like chocolate, crisps. 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 dietitian. |
| 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. |
| Bruising | Bruising without reason and bleeding easily may be caused by low numbers of platelets in your blood, or platelets not working as well as usual. | Stop taking valproate and see your doctor now. |