

## Carbamazepine (pron. car-bam-a-zee-pean)

### What is carbamazepine used for?

Carbamazepine (also known as Tegretol<sup>®</sup> and Tegretol Retard<sup>®</sup>) is mainly used to help treat the symptoms of bipolar mood disorder (mainly mania) and epilepsy. It is sometimes also used to help the symptoms of trigeminal neuralgia (a painful condition of the face), alcohol withdrawal and other conditions. It is made as tablets, slow-release tablets, chewable tablets, a liquid, and suppositories.

### What is the usual dose of carbamazepine?

The usual dose of carbamazepine is around 400-600mg a day for bipolar mood disorder, up to 2000mg for epilepsy and 600mg a day for trigeminal neuralgia.

### How should I take carbamazepine?

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. Do not chew the plain or Retard tablets. For the liquid, use a medicine spoon or oral syringe. Use it carefully to make sure you measure the correct amount.

### When should I take carbamazepine?

Take your carbamazepine as directed on the medicine label. Try to take it at regular times each day. The Retard<sup>®</sup> tablets can be taken once or twice a day. Taking it at mealtimes may make it easier for you to remember as there is no problem about taking carbamazepine 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.

### What are the alternatives to carbamazepine?

This will depend on what you are taking it for. There are many other medicines (e.g. lithium, quetiapine, olanzapine, valproate) and talking therapies for bipolar disorder; for epilepsy (many other anticonvulsants); and for other conditions. See our "Handy charts" to help you compare the medicines, how they work and their side effects.

### How long will carbamazepine take to work?

This will depend on what you are taking it for. It should start to work in a couple of weeks, and the effect builds over the next few weeks. Please look at one of the "Handy charts" for more help and advice.

### How long will I need to keep taking carbamazepine for?

This will depend on what you are taking it for. It could be months or even years. Please look at one of the "Handy charts" for more help and advice.

### Is carbamazepine addictive?

Carbamazepine is not addictive.

### Can I stop taking carbamazepine suddenly?

It is unwise to stop taking it suddenly, even if you feel better. Your symptoms can return if treatment is stopped too early. This may occur some weeks or even months after carbamazepine has been stopped. When the time comes, you should stop carbamazepine by a gradual reduction in the dose over several weeks. You should discuss this fully with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

### What should I do if I forget to take a dose of carbamazepine?

Take the missed dose as soon as you remember unless it is within about 4-6 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. If you have problems remembering your doses (as many people do) ask your pharmacist, doctor or nurse about this. There are some special packs, boxes and devices that can be used to help you remember.

### Will carbamazepine affect my other medication?

Carbamazepine has many interactions with other medicines:

- Carbamazepine must not be taken with clozapine or St. John's wort.
- If you drink alcohol while taking carbamazepine it may make you feel more sleepy
- The effects of carbamazepine can sometimes be increased by calcium-channel blockers (e.g. diltiazem, verapamil) and some antibiotics e.g. doxycycline, erythromycin, fluconazole or isoniazid
- The effect of carbamazepine can be decreased by phenobarbital, phenytoin or rifampicin
- Carbamazepine can sometimes decrease the effect of some antipsychotics (e.g. aripiprazole, clozapine, haloperidol, quetiapine, risperidone), antiretrovirals (used for HIV), ciclosporin, corticosteroids, nicoumalone, oral contraceptives, omeprazole, tricyclics (e.g. dosulepin, imipramine, lofepramine), valproate (e.g. Epilim<sup>®</sup>, Depakote<sup>®</sup>), warfarin, melatonin, lamotrigine, topiramate, bupropion, methadone
- Carbamazepine will stop "The Contraceptive Pill" (oral contraceptive) working so you will need a higher dose or use other methods of contraception e.g. condom or coil. Ask your doctor or local family planning clinic for advice.

Not all of these interactions happen in everyone. Some of these medicines can still be used together but you will need to follow your doctor's instructions carefully. There are many other possible drug interactions.

## What sort of side-effects might occur if I am taking carbamazepine?

The table below will show you some of the main side effects you might get from carbamazepine.

Side effect	What happens	What to do about it
<b>COMMON</b> ( <i>more than about 1 in 10 people might get these</i> )		
Sleepiness	Feeling sleepy, drowsy or sluggish. It can last for a few hours after taking your dose.	Don't drive or use machinery. Ask your doctor if you can take your carbamazepine at a different time of the day or have the sustained release tablet.
Diplopia	Seeing double or "double vision".	Don't drive or use machinery. See your doctor if you are worried. Sustained release tablets may help.
Dizziness	Feeling light-headed and faint.	Don't stand up too quickly. Try and lie down when you feel it coming on. Don't drive.
Stomach upset	Feeling sick and being sick. You may have a dry mouth.	If it is bad, contact your doctor. It may be possible to adjust your dose or when you take the carbamazepine.
<b>UNCOMMON</b> ( <i>less than about 1 in 10 people might get these</i> )		
Headache	When your head is painful and pounding.	Try paracetamol. Your pharmacist will be able to advise if this is safe to take with any other medicines you may be taking.
Ataxia	Being very unsteady on your feet.	Your carbamazepine level may be too high. Contact your doctor now. A blood test may be needed.
<b>RARE</b> ( <i>less than about 1 in 100 people might get these</i> )		
Constipation	When you want to poop but can't (the opposite of diarrhoea). You can't pass a motion.	Make sure you eat enough fibre, cereal or fruit. Make sure you are drinking enough fluid, keep active and get some exercise e.g. walking. If this does not help, ask your doctor or pharmacist for a mild laxative.
Confusion	Your mind is all mixed up.	Your carbamazepine level may be too high. Contact your doctor now. A blood test may be needed.
Erythematous rash	A red rash seen anywhere on the skin.	Stop taking carbamazepine and contact your doctor now.
Ankle oedema	Swelling on the ankles, legs or feet	It is not usually dangerous. Tell your doctor next time you meet.
SIADH (syndrome of inappropriate antidiuretic hormone hypersecretion)	Symptoms include not passing much urine, headache, confusion, tiredness and, if very severe, seizures and coma.	SIADH can lead to hyponatraemia (low sodium), and water intoxication. This can be dangerous. Contact your doctor now.
<b>RARE</b> ( <i>less than about 1 in 1000 people might get these</i> )		
Agranulocytosis and thrombocytopenia	You may get more infections, bruise more easily or have a sore throat or a temperature.	See your doctor now if you get an infection, sore throat, fever or bruise more easily. You may need a blood test.

Do not be worried by this list of side effects. Some people get no side effects at all and others may get some effects that are not listed in this table. If you think you might have a side effect to your medicine, you should ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist. If you want to know more, go to our website for links to other websites with more information.

## Will I need a blood test if I am taking carbamazepine?

You may need to have a blood test (or even several) after starting carbamazepine. You may then need a test every six months or so to make sure that the dose of carbamazepine is right for you.

## Can I drive or cycle while I am taking carbamazepine?

You may feel a bit sleepy at first when taking carbamazepine. You should be careful as it may slow down your reaction times. Until this wears off, or you know how it affects you, do not drive or operate machinery.

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