

Valproate (pron. val-pro-eight)

What is valproate used for?

Valproate is the name of the active part of sodium valproate (also known as Epilim[®], Episenta[®]), valproic acid (Convulex[®]) and semisodium valproate (Depakote[®]). It is mainly 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 e.g. if taking higher doses of clozapine. It is also used to help the symptoms of bipolar depression and some other conditions. It is made as tablets, capsules, crushable tablets, a sugar-free liquid, a syrup, granules and injection.

What is the usual dose of valproate?

The usual dose of valproate is around 400-2000mg a day, but this depends on what you are taking it for.

How 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 and syrup, use a medicine spoon, dropper or oral syringe. Use it carefully to make sure you measure the correct amount. Episenta[®] capsules can be emptied onto cold food or drink and swallowed straight away without chewing, as can the granules.

When should I take valproate?

Take your valproate as directed on the medicine label. Try to take it at regular times each day. 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.

What are the alternatives to valproate?

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

How long will valproate take to work?

This will depend on what you are taking it for. Please look at one of the "Handy charts" for more help and advice.

How long will I need to keep taking valproate for?

This will depend on what you are taking it for. Please look at one of the "Handy charts" for more help and advice.

Is valproate addictive?

Valproate is not addictive but you should not stop it suddenly (see the next question).

Can I stop taking valproate 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 valproate has been stopped. When the time comes, you should withdraw valproate 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 valproate?

Take the missed dose as soon as you remember unless it is 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. You should tell your doctor about this next time you meet. If you have problems remembering your doses (as many people do) ask your pharmacist, doctor or nurse about this.

Can I drink alcohol while I am taking valproate?

If you drink alcohol while taking valproate it may make you feel more sleepy. This is particularly important if you need to drive or operate machinery and you must seek advice on this.

Will valproate affect my other medication?

Valproate has a few interactions with other medicines:

- Valproate should only be used with care with phenytoin
- If you have enteric coated tablets or capsules, do not take indigestion remedies at the same time of day
- The effects of valproate can sometimes be increased by erythromycin or fluoxetine
- The effect of valproate can be decreased by antiretrovirals, some antibiotics (e.g. meropenem), carbamazepine, topiramate or oxcarbazepine
- Valproate can sometimes decrease the effect of olanzapine
- You should have no problems with "The Contraceptive Pill" and valproate.

- Valproate can increase the effect of tricyclics (e.g. dosulepin, lofepramine), some antiretrovirals for HIV (e.g. zidovudine), carbamazepine, lamotrigine, phenobarbital, rufinamide, tiagabine or phenytoin.

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 valproate?

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

Side effect	What happens	What to do about it
COMMON (more than about 1 in 10 people might get these)		
Increase in appetite and weight gain	Eating more and putting on weight.	A diet full of vegetables and fibre should help prevent weight gain.
UNCOMMON (less than about 1 in 10 people might get these)		
Gastric irritation	You have an upset stomach. This usually happens at the start of treatment.	Take your valproate with or after food. If this is severe or does not go away, see your doctor now.
Hair loss	Some of your hair falls out and may seem thinner. This stops after a while.	Discuss with your doctor. This can be upsetting for some people. Sometimes it grows back a little curly.
Nausea	Feeling sick.	If it is bad, contact your doctor.
RARE (less than about 1 in 100 people might get these)		
Sleepiness	Feeling sleepy or sluggish.	Don't drive or use machinery. This usually happens early in treatment and should go away. Ask your doctor if you can take your valproate at a different time.
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 now.
Tremor	Feeling shaky.	This may be due to the dose of valproate you are taking. Discuss with your doctor.
Ataxia	Being very unsteady on your feet.	Your dose may be too high. Contact your doctor now.
Confusion	Your mind is all mixed up.	Your dose may be too high. Contact your doctor now.
Lethargy	You feel tired all the time and don't feel like doing anything.	Your dose may be too high. Contact your doctor now.
Thrombocytopenia and impaired platelet function	Low numbers of platelets in your blood. The platelets that are there may not work very well.	You may bruise without reason and bleed easily. Stop taking valproate and see your doctor now.
Rash	A rash or itching seen anywhere on the skin.	Stop taking your valproate and contact your doctor now.

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 valproate?

You will need some tests to check on your blood levels and liver for the first 6 months or so.

Can I drive or cycle while I am taking valproate?

You may feel a bit sleepy at first when taking valproate. You should be careful as it may slow down your reaction times. Until this wears off, or you know how valproate 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.