



Neurontin (gabapentin)

Generic name: Gabapentin

Available strengths: 100 mg, 300 mg,
400 mg capsules; 600 mg, 800 mg tablets;
250 mg/5 mL oral solution

Available in generic: No

Drug class: Anticonvulsant/mood stabilizer

General Information

Neurontin (gabapentin) is better known as an anticonvulsant—a medication for treating epilepsy. This may present some confusion for patients, as well as their families, when they are prescribed an anticonvulsant without a history of seizures. In the past decade, anticonvulsants have increasingly become the medications of choice for the treatment of bipolar disorder, particularly in acute mania. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration, however, has approved Neurontin only for the treatment of epilepsy and chronic pain. The use of a medication for its approved indication is called *labeled use*. In clinical practice, however, physicians often prescribe medications for *unlabeled* (“off-label”) uses when published clinical studies, case reports, or their own clinical experiences support the efficacy and safety of those treatments. Neurontin’s unlabeled uses in psychiatry include treatment of bipolar disorder in both the manic and depressive phases of the illness and of anxiety disorders, especially panic disorder. When Neurontin and other anticonvulsants are used for treating mood disorders, they are considered **mood stabilizers**.

It is not totally clear how some anticonvulsants are effective for seizures and bipolar disorder. The anticonvulsants, which have very complex effects on the central nervous system, may be effective by controlling “kindling” in the areas of the brain from which the psychiatric disorder emanates. Kindling is a phenomenon that occurs when repeated subthreshold stimulation is applied to certain regions of the brain and sensitizes them, setting off a cascade of events leading to seizures or manic behavior. By decreasing electrical conduction or neurotransmitter activity in unstable brain cells, anticonvulsants are effective in controlling seizures and bipolar illness.

Dosing Information

Neurontin is usually started at a dosage of 300 mg two or three times a day, and the dosage is increased by 300 mg every 3–4 days as clinically indicated. The usual maximum daily dosage for treatment of bipolar dis-

order is 1,800–2,400 mg. Because Neurontin is eliminated primarily by the kidneys, patients with significant renal impairment may require lower dosages.

Common Side Effects

Neurontin is generally well tolerated and has very few adverse effects. The common side effects associated with Neurontin are sedation, dizziness, impaired coordination, difficulty with walking (**ataxia**), tiredness, jerky eye movements (**nystagmus**), double vision (**diplopia**), and tremor. Daytime sedation may be reduced by taking a larger proportion of the divided dosage at bedtime. The side effects are generally temporary and subside as tolerance to the medication develops.

Adverse Reactions and Precautions

Neurontin is generally a well-tolerated medication and is infrequently discontinued because of adverse events. Sedation and dizziness are the most frequent side effects that may become troubling, especially for seniors and those taking other sedating medications. Seniors may be susceptible to falling from the effects of vertigo or dizziness. Sedation becomes hazardous when driving or operating machinery. For individuals who are sensitive to these side effects, increasing the dosage slowly or using lower dosages may be necessary.

Use in Pregnancy and Breastfeeding: Pregnancy Category C

There have not been adequately controlled studies with Neurontin in pregnant women to determine its risk to the woman and fetus. However, compared with lithium, Tegretol, and Depakote, Neurontin is safer for use in pregnancy. However, it is not recommended for use during pregnancy, especially during the first trimester. If Neurontin is required because discontinuation may result in relapse and present a greater danger to the woman and unborn child, the patient may continue to take Neurontin, after giving informed consent to the physician, or an alternative medication or treatment may be used.

Nursing mothers should not take Neurontin, because it is excreted in breast milk and may be harmful to the baby when ingested. If stopping the medication is not an alternative, breastfeeding should not be started or should be discontinued.

Possible Drug Interactions

Because Neurontin is not extensively metabolized in the liver like many of the other mood stabilizers, it exerts little influence on the hepatic enzymes. Therefore, Neurontin has very few drug interactions of any clinical importance. Patients, however, should be aware that when Neurontin is taken with other medications that have central nervous system side effects, it may make sedation, fatigue, dizziness, and ataxia worse.

Patients taking Neurontin should not consume alcohol because the combination may increase sedation and drowsiness. Moreover, the sedative effects of alcohol may act as a depressant, obscuring the therapeutic effects of Neurontin and complicating treatment.

