



## Using *Valproic Acid* in Children and Adolescents

This information explains how *Valproic Acid* can be used as part of a treatment plan with children and adolescents. You may wish to share this information with your family members to help them to understand your treatment options. Since every person's needs are different, it is important that you follow the advice provided to you by your own doctor, nurse and/or pharmacist and speak to them if you have any questions about this medication.



### Overview

Valproic acid (Depakene<sup>®</sup>) and a similar medication, divalproex sodium (Epival<sup>®</sup>), belong to a group of medications mainly used to treat seizure disorders. These medications are also considered to be "mood stabilizers".

### What is Valproic Acid used for?

Valproic acid is used to treat:

- Mania (elevated mood) associated with Bipolar Disorder
- Rapid cycling Bipolar Disorder
- Long term control of Bipolar Disorder
- Epilepsy

In some cases, valproic acid is used may be used to treat aggression and impulsivity in some children and adolescents. Your doctor may be using this medicine for another reason. If you are unclear why valproic acid is being prescribed, please ask your doctor.

### What is the difference between Valproic Acid and Divalproex Sodium?

Divalproex sodium is converted to valproic acid in the body. So, essentially, both these medications are the same. Some people feel the divalproex sodium is a little easier on their stomach than valproic acid.

### How does Valproic Acid work?

Valproic acid alters the way nerves send electronic signals. It has a "stabilizing" effect on certain chemicals in the body. By affecting these chemicals, valproic acid helps those with Bipolar Disorder avoid having severe mood fluctuations and returns activity level to normal. It helps to have more control over emotions and function better. The exact way that valproic acid improves the symptoms of Bipolar Disorder is still not fully known.

### How should Valproic Acid be taken?

Valproic acid (Depekene<sup>®</sup>) is available as capsules and an oral syrup. Divalproex sodium is available as tablets. Valproic acid is usually taken two or three times a day. The dose of valproic acid is usually based on you respond to it. Usually, your doctor will start with a low dose of valproic acid and increase it slowly every 3-7 days. The doctor may ask you to have blood tests to measure how much valproic acid is in your blood.

Valproic acid should be taken at the same time each day as directed by your doctor. Try to connect it with something you do each day (like eating breakfast or brushing your teeth) so that you don't forget.

**Do not take your valproic acid just before getting a blood test – this can affect your valproic acid level results. Instead, take your valproic acid dose right after the blood test has been done.**

Whenever possible, the addition of talk therapy (*such as Cognitive Behaviour Therapy – CBT*) to valproic acid increases the potential for benefits.

## When will this medication start working?

When valproic acid is being used to control mania, it takes about 1-2 weeks before you notice a decrease in symptoms like racing thoughts, improved sleep, and decreased irritability. You might notice an improvement earlier if valproic acid is combined with other medications. Since these medications take time to work, do not increase, decrease or stop them without discussing it with your doctor.

Valproic acid does not work in everyone. If you find it has not helped you within a month or two, or the side effects are too bothersome, your doctor may recommend you try a different medication.

## How long do I have to take this medication?



This depends on the symptoms you have, how frequent they occur and how long you have had them. Most people who have bipolar disorder need to take valproic acid for at least 6 months. This allows time for your symptoms to stabilize and for you to regain functioning while decreasing the chance that you will have another mood episode. After this time, you and your doctor can discuss the benefits and risks to continuing treatment.

If you have had several episodes of mania or depression and you tolerate this medication well, you may be asked to take this medication indefinitely. By continuing to take this medication, you significantly decrease the chance that you may have another episode of mania or depression.

Once you have started taking this medication, your doctor and you will need to monitor for both the beneficial and unwanted effects. Your doctor may order some blood tests and will likely check your progress and discuss changes in symptoms during the next 3 months to confirm that the medication is working properly and that possible side effects are avoided.

**Keep all appointments with your doctor and the laboratory. Your doctor may order certain lab tests (like liver function tests, complete blood counts and/or valproic acid levels) to check how you/your child is responding to this medicine.**

**Do not stop taking this medication if you are feeling better without first discussing it with your doctor.**

## Is Valproic Acid addictive?

No, valproic acid is not addictive. You will not have “cravings” for it like some people do with nicotine or street drugs. If you and your doctor decide to stop it, your doctor will explain how to safely come off this medicine.

## What are the side effects and what should I do if I get them?

As with most medications, side effects may occur in those who take valproic acid. Most side effects are considered to be mild and temporary. Side effects may occur before any of the beneficial effects. It is possible for some individuals to experience a side effect that they feel is serious or long lasting. If this occurs, speak to your doctor about ways to manage these side effects. Here are some of the more common side effects of taking this medication. In brackets are suggested ways to lessen these effects.

## Common side effects

Should any of these side effects be too troublesome for you, please discuss them with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

- Drowsiness (*try taking the dose at bedtime*)
- Some hand trembling - tremors
- Restlessness (*avoid caffeine, from colas and coffee*)
- Skin rash or itchy skin (*use special anti-itch moisturizers like aveeno*)
- Stomach ache, nausea (*try taking valproic acid with food or switch to the divalproex brand*)
- Weight gain (*mostly at higher doses; monitor your food intake, increase your exercise*)

**Uncommon side effects** (e.g., those that occur in less than 5% of patients)

Contact your doctor IMMEDIATELY if you have any of these side effects:

- Muscle weakness
- Hair loss
- Unusual bleeding or bruising (low white cells and platelets in the blood)
- Some hormonal changes (e.g., change in menstrual periods)
- Polycystic ovarian syndrome in females (the presence of many cysts in the ovaries)
- Some cases of liver damage (early signs of liver damage include yellowish skin, rash, loss of appetite, vomiting and weakness)
- Double vision
- Swelling in the face or lower legs
- Confusion

**What precautions should my doctor and I be aware of when taking this medication?**

Tell your doctor or pharmacist if you:

- have any allergies or have had bad reactions to other medications.
- are (or start) taking any other prescription or non-prescription medications. Many medicines interact with valproic acid. Your doctor may need to change the doses of your medication(s) or monitor you carefully for side effects if you are taking other medications.
- have a history of diabetes, heart, kidney or liver disease.
- miss a period, become pregnant, are breast feeding or are trying to become pregnant. Valproic Acid should be avoided in pregnancy if possible due to concerns over neural tube defects.

**Tip:** Valproic Acid can make some individuals feel drowsy, dizzy or slowed down. If you experience these temporary side effects, it is important to avoid operating heavy machinery or driving a car.



**What special instructions should I follow while using Valproic Acid?**

- Keep all appointments with your doctor and the laboratory. Your doctor may order certain lab tests (like glucose or prolactin levels, or liver tests) to check how you are responding to Valproic Acid.
- Do not allow anyone else to use your medication.
- Try to keep a healthy and well balanced diet. Some individuals taking Valproic Acid gain weight due to an increase in appetite.
- If you experience any abnormal movements in your arms body or face, tell your doctor as soon a possible.

**What should I do if I forget to take a dose?**

If you miss a dose of this medication, take it as soon as possible. However, if it is almost time for your next dose (e.g., within 4 hours), do not take the missed dose or double your next dose. Instead, continue your regular dosing schedule.



**What storage conditions are needed for Valproic Acid?**

- Keep this medication in the original container, stored at room temperature away from moisture and heat (e.g., not in the bathroom).
- Keep this medication out of reach from children.