

Pregabalin

What is pregabalin?

Some pains come about because the nerves themselves are either damaged or not working properly, and these nerves give off abnormal or painful signals. This is called 'neuropathic pain' and pregabalin has been shown to be effective in helping this type of pain.

How does it work?

Pregabalin is an anti-convulsant drug that is used to treat epilepsy. Pregabalin works by stabilizing the nerves that transmit painful messages to the brain. It 'calms the nerves down' makes them less excitable so that the pain messages to the brain are reduced.

Will it work?

I don't know. It is worth a try and in drug trials it has been shown to help in about one out of three patients.

When should I take it?

A dose of pregabalin lasts for twelve hours. This means that the medication must be taken twice a day. You don't have to take it on a full stomach, but it is best to take most medicines this way.

What dose should I take?

The dosage will vary from patient to patient. It is necessary to find a dosage that that reduces your pain but doesn't cause you excessive side effects. Pregabalin is initially prescribed at a low dosage and this is then increased in steps. The starting dosage also depends on your weight and age. I would suggest the following:

For elderly and small patients:

25mg morning and evening for the first week
50mg morning and evening next week
75mg morning and evening for the rest of the month

This can be increased depending on the clinical response up to 150mg morning and evening.

For larger and younger patients:

75mg morning and evening for the first week
150mg morning and evening next three weeks

This can be increased depending on the clinical response up to 300mg morning and evening.

You should stop at the dosage at which you are getting side effects. The trick would be to find the dose that best balances the benefit of the drug against the side effects.

Do I need to take it regularly?

Yes. It is most important that you take the medication on a regular basis. Pregabalin is not a drug like paracetamol that can be taken if and when you have pain. It helps to reduce pain by stabilizing the nerve linings and preventing abnormal messages being transmitted along them. Prevention is better than cure, and if you don't take it regularly then it won't work as it is intended.

What are the side effects?

1. Drowsiness. You might feel tired and sleepy when you start taking the medication, but this should reduce with time.
2. Unsteadiness on your feet. Some elderly patients might experience this.
3. Muddled thinking and forgetfulness. Some patients describe 'being spaced out' by the drug, but this is dependent on the dose that you take.

How long should I try it for?

I would suggest a trial period of three months. This time would allow you to increase the dose to the level that suits you and gives you the most benefit. If it hasn't helped after three months then you should then wean down and stop the medication. If it has helped, then you should continue take it for the long-term.

What do you mean by long-term?

By long-term I mean for at least six months, if not up to a year. If you wish to stop taking the medication, then I would suggest reducing down the dosage over one week before stopping it. If you feel that the medication did help after all, then go back onto the dosage that you were previously taking for another six months. This weaning process could be repeated at six monthly intervals.

Will it interfere with my other medications?

Pregabalin does not interfere with most medications that patients might be taking. It can be used in patients who are on tablets for blood pressure or sugar diabetes, and it can be used with anti-depressant medication. You can take it if you are on warfarin or other blood thinning agents, but you must inform the doctor who is looking after your anti-coagulation.

Will I get addicted to it?

No. There is no risk that you will get addicted to pregabalin. Remember that it is also used to treat epilepsy, and these patients would take it on a regular daily basis for a lifetime.

Can I have a drink with it?

There is no dangerous interaction with pregabalin and alcohol. You can have a drink but be cautious and remember that the medication will exaggerate the effect of the alcohol.

What do I do if I can't cope with the side effects?

Do not stop taking pregabalin abruptly. It is best to reduce down the dosage and wean yourself of the medication over a period of a week. Pregabalin doesn't work for everyone, and the last thing I would want as a doctor is make the treatment worse than the pain problem.