

Gabapentin

For withdrawal management

How it works:

Gabapentin works similarly to alcohol by calming your nervous system, which decreases alcohol withdrawal symptoms like headaches, anxiety, and sweating. Using gabapentin to help with withdrawal has not been approved by Health Canada. Your doctor or nurse is allowed to prescribe it, and this is called “off-label”.

What to expect:

- Your risk of **severe** alcohol withdrawal will be assessed by your health care provider if you decide to stop or reduce drinking. If you're at low risk, gabapentin can help with your withdrawal symptoms. You may also try other pain medications like Tylenol, social support, and/or thinking and behavioural techniques.
- You can stay at your home while you go through detox. Your health care team will check in with you regularly to check your withdrawal symptoms by phone or virtually on a computer. They will discuss what to do if your symptoms get worse or if you have other concerns.
 - You may need to visit the emergency department if you experience serious withdrawal symptoms like confusion, delirium, and seizures.
- Alcohol withdrawal symptoms usually go away in 5–7 days. You and your health care provider will decide the best next steps together.
 - You can stop taking gabapentin by gradually reducing your dose over 3–5 days.
 - You can continue taking gabapentin to help you reach your long-term goals for staying abstinent or reducing your drinking.
 - You and your prescriber may decide to switch to another medication (like acamprosate or naltrexone) to help you reach your long-term goals.

Side effects:

- Side effects are usually mild and go away over time.
- Most common: nausea, headache, drowsiness, and dizziness.
- Less common: slurred speech, uncontrolled eye movements, shaking (tremors), weight gain, indigestion, back pain, and reduced kidney functioning.

Dosage:

- Doses to treat alcohol withdrawal usually start at 300mg taken 3 times a day. If you are still having severe withdrawal symptoms, your provider may increase your dose to 600mg taken 3 times a day. They may even give you extra doses to help with your symptoms. Do not take more than 3600mg per day.
- You will stay on that dose until the most severe symptoms have gone away. This may last 2-4 days. Then your provider will lower your dose gradually over the next 3-5 days, until you are down to zero.
- Gabapentin comes in multiple strengths (100m, 300mg, 400mg, and 600mg), so you may be prescribed more than one strength to get the dose that is right for you. Be mindful not to mix up strengths.

Risks:

- Avoid driving, operating dangerous machinery, or doing other activities that require you to be alert and coordinated while taking gabapentin.
- Gabapentin may not be recommended if:
 - You have a lung or kidney condition (although you may be able to still take it at a lower dose).
 - You have cognitive (brain) impairment.
 - You have a history of severe withdrawal symptoms, such as seizures and delirium tremens (DTs).
- Using it for a long time can lead to an addiction.
 - Using a higher dose than what is prescribed for you can cause pleasurable feelings and over a long time, this can develop into an addiction. Talk to your health care provider if you're concerned about addiction, cravings, or difficulties taking it as prescribed.
 - Quitting gabapentin suddenly after using it for a long time can cause anxiety, insomnia, nausea, pain, and sweating.
- Some pregnant people have negative effects after taking gabapentin. Talk to your health care provider if you are, become, or are planning to get pregnant or breastfeed.
- It's unknown whether gabapentin is safe for people who are under 18 or over 65 years old.
- **WARNING: Mixing gabapentin with other substances that are “downers” (including alcohol and opioids) can slow your breathing or even cause death. For your safety, it's important to talk with your health care provider about what can be mixed safely, including both prescribed and non-prescribed substances. If you're not able to stop using other substances, there are ways to reduce your risk, like not using alone, taking a smaller amount than normal to start, and spacing out your use to avoid mixing substances.**