

## Depakote (divalproex sodium) - Valproic Acid

### Brand and Generic Names

- Depakene<sup>®</sup> (Valproic acid) – Immediate release
- Syrup: 250 mg/5mL (there is 250 mg in one teaspoonful)
- Capsules: 250 mg
- Depakote<sup>®</sup>/Depakote<sup>®</sup> ER (both Divalproex sodium) – both are enteric-coated and slow release; Depakote<sup>®</sup> ER releases more slowly than Depakote<sup>®</sup>.
- Tablets: 125 mg, 250 mg, 500 mg
- Sprinkle capsules: 125 mg
- Slow-release tablets: 250 mg, 500 mg
- Depacon<sup>®</sup> (Valproate sodium) – Intravenous (IV) formulation
- 100 mg/mL

**Note: Even though valproic acid is available in different names, strengths and formulations, all provide the same active medicine. (See below for what you need to know about the different forms)**

### What is valproic acid and what does it treat?

Valproic acid is a prescription medication that has been proven effective in the treatment of epilepsy, and manic episodes associated with bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression. A manic episode, or mania, is when a person experiences several of the following symptoms at the same time: "high" or irritable mood, very high self esteem, decreased need for sleep, pressure to keep talking, racing thoughts, being easily distracted, frequently involved in activities with a large risk for bad consequences (for example, excessive buying sprees). A depressive episode, or depression, is when a person

experiences several of the following symptoms at the same time: "low" or depressed mood (for example, sad, empty, tearful), decreased interest in most or all activities, changes in appetite (usually decreased), changes in sleep (usually poor sleep), loss of energy, feeling worthless/guilty/ hopeless/ helpless, difficulty concentrating, thoughts of death (suicidal thinking).

Bipolar disorder is a brain disorder (mental illness) which exposes people to these mood changes over the course of time. Bipolar disorder affects more than two million Americans each year, but patients with this disorder can lead fulfilling lives when they receive proper treatment. Unfortunately, many of those with this illness don't receive treatment.

Medication is an essential part of successful treatment for bipolar disorder, and valproic acid is among the most well studied medications approved to treat mania. With the proper dosage, valproic acid can reduce manic symptoms, shorten hospitalizations, help prevent future manic episodes, and make it possible for an individual to live productively in the community.

### **What is the most important information I should know about valproic acid?**

Since bipolar disorder is a long-term illness, duration of treatment with mood stabilizers like valproic acid may also be long-term. It is very important to take valproic acid regularly and exactly as prescribed by your doctor. Not taking valproic acid on a daily basis not only increases your risk for a relapse in your mood symptoms, it may also increase the possibilities of troublesome side effects such as seizures.

- Valproic acid may be prescribed by itself or along with other medications to manage your mood symptoms.
- There are many different ways for valproic acid to be dosed. Higher starting doses (also known as "loading doses") have been shown to be as effective as slower dose increases, and may result in a faster therapeutic response in many individuals.
- Valproic acid is available in many different forms. It is important that you know which form you are taking. It is also important that you not interchange or mix these forms, since they are not always equal in strength. For example, Depakote<sup>®</sup> 500 mg tablets is NOT equal to Depakote<sup>®</sup> ER 500 mg tablets.
- The amount of valproic acid in the blood can be measured. Studies have shown that blood levels between 50 – 125 (micrograms/mL) give patients the best chance of response to valproic acid. In the beginning of treatment, your doctor may check your blood once or twice a week. Once your symptoms are controlled well, blood samples are drawn less frequently.
- Valproic acid can be associated with many side effects (*see side effects section*), but most can be minimized with regular monitoring. Blood tests are done in order to check for liver, pancreas, and platelet abnormalities, which are rare.

There is some evidence to suggest that valproic acid may have advantages for subtypes of bipolar illness—such as rapid cycling and mixed states. Be sure to assess with your doctor the type of bipolar illness so you may better match your interventions to it.

### **What should I discuss with my healthcare provider before taking Depakene<sup>®</sup>, Depakote<sup>®</sup>, Depakote<sup>®</sup> ER?**

- Symptoms that are most bothersome to you about your condition
- If you have thoughts of suicide
- If you have a seizure disorder and are taking any other anticonvulsant medications
- Any other chronic medical conditions that you may have (especially with your liver or pancreas, and if you have ever had bleeding problems)
- Medications you have taken in the past to treat bipolar disorder
- Medications that you are currently taking for other conditions
- Side effects that you may have experienced with medications (e.g., stomach pain, vomiting, diarrhea, weight gain)
- If you are pregnant, plan to become pregnant, or are breast-feeding
- If you smoke, drink alcohol, or use illegal drugs

### **How should I take Depakote<sup>®</sup>?**

Valproic acid is available in many different forms (for example, liquid, sprinkle capsules, “long-acting”). The recommended starting dose is between 750 and 1500 mg daily taken in divided doses. (The starting dose should be lower in elderly patients.) Dosages are adjusted based on response and blood level. One person may need a higher dose to get a therapeutic blood level compared to another individual. The usual effective dose range is between 1000 and 2000 mg daily, although lower or higher doses are needed in some cases.

- Take valproic acid with food to minimize stomach cramping, nausea, and vomiting
- Always take valproic acid at the same time every day
- Use a pillbox or a calendar as a reminder to take your medications. If needed, have a family member or friend check-in with you to help you take your medications.
- If you are currently taking valproic acid multiple times a day and find it difficult to remember to take it regularly, ask your health-care provider if a once-a-day tablet form of Depakote<sup>®</sup> is right for you.

### **What differences should I know about the different forms of valproic acid?**

Although all forms of valproic acid deliver the same active medication, there are some differences between each form. Different forms are available for this medication for several reasons: 1) for easier swallowing, 2) for fewer side effects, and 3) for taking this medicine fewer times each day.

- Differences in formulation

– Liquid: Always take it with food; otherwise it may cause stomach cramping and diarrhea. Do not mix in soda or any other carbonated drinks because it can upset your stomach. Take it 2 – 4 times daily as per your doctor’s instructions.

– Tablets: Swallow the tablets whole. Chewing the tablets gives an unpleasant taste and can be irritating to the mouth and throat. Take it 2 – 4 times daily as per your doctor’s instructions.

– Sprinkle capsules: May be swallowed whole or opened and sprinkled onto food like applesauce or pudding. Sprinkle capsules should not be chewed. Take 2 – 3 times daily as per your doctor’s instructions.

– Long acting tablets (Depakote<sup>®</sup>, and Depakote extended-release): These two are NOT equal to each other. Always check the color of the tablets to make sure it is what your doctor prescribed. Depakote<sup>®</sup> tablets may be taken 1 – 3 times a day. Depakote<sup>®</sup> extended-release tablets can be taken just once a day.

### **What happens if I miss a dose?**

- If you miss a dose of valproic acid, take it as soon as you remember if it is not too close to when your next dose is due - discuss this with your healthcare provider. If it is close to your next dose, wait until then to take the medication and *skip the missed dose*. Do not double your next dose or take more than what you have been told to take.

### **What should I avoid while taking valproic acid?**

- Avoid drinking alcohol while taking Depakote<sup>®</sup> because it can increase the effects of alcohol and lead to significant drowsiness.
- Drinking alcohol while taking Depakote<sup>®</sup> may also increase your risk of developing liver problems.
- Avoid using illegal drugs while taking Depakote<sup>®</sup> because they may counteract Depakote<sup>®</sup>’s effect and increase your risk of developing seizures.
- As Depakote<sup>®</sup> may cause drowsiness, make sure you know how it will affect you before you begin driving or operating any machinery.

### **What happens if I overdose?**

- If an overdose occurs, whether intentional or accidental, immediate medical attention is necessary. Call your doctor or emergency medical service (911).
- Overdosing with Depakote<sup>®</sup> may lead to over sedation, coma, and abnormal heart rhythms. It may even lead to death.

## **What are the possible side effects of valproic acid?**

- Common side effects of valproic acid are nausea, drowsiness, and dizziness; but for some patients these conditions lessen or go away over time. Because valproic acid may cause drowsiness, patients receiving this medication should not engage in activities that are possibly dangerous (for example, driving a motor vehicle) while undergoing treatment until the drowsiness goes away.
- There are significant birth defect risks for pregnant patients who are taking valproic acid. If you have bipolar illness and are considering pregnancy, be sure to assess the risks and benefits of every medication you are taking and review this with your psychiatrist. Taking valproic acid while you are pregnant should be discussed with your doctor in each case. Use of valproic acid during the first trimester of pregnancy has been associated with an increased risk of spinal cord defects (e.g., spina bifida) in the fetus. Bleeding and liver problems, as well as other birth defects have been reported too. If you are already pregnant and on valproic acid, call your doctor asap to discuss the situation, being mindful that quickly stopping valproic acid may lead to harmful effects such as seizures.
- Liver problems, which are rarely severe, may develop on valproic acid, especially in the first six months of treatment. Blood tests to monitor liver function are an important part of treatment with valproic acid, in order to make sure that you are safe. Rarely, a potentially fatal swelling of the pancreas (called pancreatitis) can also occur.
- Valproic acid may occasionally cause an increase in your blood levels of ammonia. If this happens, patients may get confused, disoriented, or have difficulty thinking. Blood tests can be used to check the amount of ammonia in your blood and ensure safety of this medication.
- Problems with low levels of white blood cell count and blood platelets, which are rarely severe, may also happen while taking this medication. Blood tests are used to check for this side effect.
- Some adverse effects on skin and hair may also occur, including rash, hair loss, and itching.
- Stopping valproic acid quickly may lead to having a seizure. Do not stop taking valproic acid without discussing it with your healthcare provider.

## **Are there any risks for taking this medication for long periods of time?**

- Patients taking valproic acid for a long time may experience weight gain. Speak to your healthcare provider if this side effect is bothersome to you.
- Long-term use of valproic acid may lead to some hair loss. Speak to your healthcare provider if you experience this side effect.
- If you experience right-sided stomach pain, severe nausea/vomiting, facial swelling, yellowing of the skin, and pale stools, these may be signs of liver problems. If you experience any of these symptoms, contact your healthcare provider immediately.

### **What other drugs interact with this medication?**

- Medications used to treat epilepsy such as phenytoin (Dilantin<sup>®</sup>), carbamazepine (Tegretol<sup>®</sup>/ Carbatrol<sup>®</sup>/Equetro<sup>®</sup>), rifampin (Rifadin<sup>®</sup>), or phenobarbital may *decrease* the levels of valproic acid and decrease the efficacy of this medication. Tell your healthcare provider if you are beginning or have recently discontinued any of these medications.
- Avoid taking high doses of aspirin (for example, 325 mg three or more times a day) to treat fever or pain. Aspirin can interfere with valproic acid and *increase* valproic acid blood levels significantly. If you are taking a baby aspirin 81 mg or Aspirin 325 mg once a day for your heart, this should not interfere with valproic acid.
- Valproic acid may increase the levels of some antidepressants such as amitriptyline (Elavil<sup>®</sup>) and some anti-seizure medications such as phenytoin (Dilantin<sup>®</sup>), carbamazepine (Tegretol<sup>®</sup>/ Carbatrol<sup>®</sup>/Equetro<sup>®</sup>), and especially lamotrigine (Lamictal<sup>®</sup>). If you are taking any of these medications with valproic acid, tell your healthcare provider immediately.
- Clonazepam (Klonopin<sup>®</sup>) combined with valproic acid has rarely produced repeated, or prolonged non-convulsive seizures.

### **How long does it take for valproic acid to work?**

In clinical studies, patients have been found to begin responding to the effects of valproic acid after five to ten days of treatment. As with any medication, physicians who prescribe valproic acid for long periods of time should regularly check the patient and the continuing need for valproic acid treatment.

### **What is the usual duration of treatment for valproic acid?**

Mood stabilizer treatment is generally needed lifelong for persons with Bipolar illness. Your doctor can best discuss the duration of treatment you need based on your symptoms and course of illness.

*Updated by Sudha Narayanaswamy, Pharm.D., BCPP, CGP  
(August 2005)*



*NAMI wishes to thank the [College of Psychiatric and Neurologic Pharmacists](#) for producing this fact sheet.*

**For further information. Please contact the pharmaceutical company listed below.**

Abbott Laboratories	100 Abbott Park Rd. Abbott Park, Illinois 60064-3500	(800) 633- 9110	<a href="http://www.abbott.com">www.abbott.com</a>
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**Free or low-cost medications provided by pharmaceutical companies**

Some pharmaceutical companies offer medication assistance programs to low-income individuals and families. These programs typically require a doctor's consent and proof of financial status. They may also require that you have either no health insurance, or no prescription drug benefit through your health insurance. Please contact the pharmaceutical company directly for specific eligibility requirements and application information.

**Depakote Rx Assistance Program: 1-800-222-6885**