

# Oxcarbazepine

Oxcarbazepine (trileptal) is an anticonvulsant (a medication for treating seizures) which is also used as a mood stabilizer. It is particularly helpful for the manic, agitated, irritable, hyper or rapid cycling phase of mood.

Oxcarbazepine usually takes 2-4 weeks to work. People who respond well to it often report that it improves racing thoughts and emotional reactivity so that they can focus better and think before they react.

Oxcarbazepine is related chemically to the mood stabilizer carbamazepine, which is FDA-approved for bipolar disorder. Oxcarbazepine does not have as many problems with drug interactions and side effects as carbamazepine.

Oxcarbazepine has small studies suggesting it may be beneficial in treating painful neuralgias and neuropathies, migraines, and alcohol withdrawal.

## How it works

Oxcarbazepine stabilizes the electrical firing of brain cells. In doing so, it prevents the brain from going into habitual cycles of depression and manic-agitation. When the brain is locked in that cycle it is called *kindling*. The same cycles have been observed in the brains of people with repetitive seizures, which is why many seizure medications like oxcarbazepine are helpful for mood swings. Oxcarbazepine can also protect brain cells from toxicity and injury.

## How should I take it?

Oxcarbazepine can be taken once or twice a day depending on how high your dose is (the XR form can be taken once per day). Doses of 900mg or less can often be taken all at once. Most people prefer to take it at night, as it can cause drowsiness, but it is fine to take in the morning if that works better for you. You can take it with or without food, but should take it after a meal if it upsets your stomach.

## What should I do if I forget a dose?

Take the missed dose as soon as you remember it. However, if it is almost time for the next dose, skip the missed dose and continue your regular dosing schedule. Do not take a double dose to make up for a missed one. Do not take more than the prescribed daily amount in 24 hours.

## How long do I need to take it?

Whether or not you can safely come off oxcarbazepine depends on your diagnosis and which other medications you are taking. Most people with bipolar disorder need to stay on at least one mood stabilizer for the long term in order to prevent mood swings. If oxcarbazepine helped, it is best to stay on it for at least 6 months before considering going off it. That gives the brain time to build up habits of stability.

## What happens if I stop it?

Oxcarbazepine is not addictive and does not cause withdrawal symptoms. You may read that stopping oxcarbazepine can cause seizures; this warning only applies to people who take it for seizures. If you plan to come off oxcarbazepine, it is best to do so slowly as that will lower the chance of sudden mood swings returning.

## Side effects

*These side effects tend to improve with time or by lowering the dose:*

Tiredness, concentration problems, stomach upset (nausea, constipation, and abdominal pain), dizziness, double vision (diplopia), jerky eye movements (nystagmus), and impaired coordination or clumsiness when walking (ataxia).

As you are starting the medicine, use caution when driving or performing tasks that require alertness. This should not be a problem once you have adjusted to the medicine and know how it affects you.

*Rare but serious side effects:*

Decreased sodium (hyponatremia) occurs 1% of the time. Symptoms of hyponatremia include flu-like feelings, excessive thirst, loss of appetite, nausea and vomiting, confusion, lethargy, and headache. The risk of hyponatremia is greater in people over age 60 and those taking thiazide diuretics (for blood pressure).

An allergic reaction is possible with any medication. Symptoms include the following; stop the medication and call me if these occur: *Pounding heartbeat; swelling of the face, throat, tongue, lips, eyes, hands, feet, ankles, or lower legs; hoarseness; difficulty swallowing or breathing; hives; rash.*

**Interactions**

*Recreational drugs:* Alcohol can increase the dizziness and dyscoordination of oxcarbazepine. Alcohol and recreational drugs can also prevent oxcarbazepine from working.

*Medicines which lower oxcarbazepine:* Carbamazepine, verapamil, and valproate.

*Medicines whose levels are raised by oxcarbazepine:* dilantin and phenobarbital.

*Medicines whose levels are lowered by oxcarbazepine:* Plendil (felodipine).

*Birth control:* Oxcarbazepine may decrease the effectiveness of oral contraceptives containing ethinyl estradiol and levonorgestrel (e.g., Demulen, Nordette, Alesse). It is best to use two forms of protection or speak with your physician about other types of birth control pills.

**Overdose**

An overdose of oxcarbazepine should be assessed and treated in the emergency room. A toxic overdose can cause difficulty breathing, seizures, irregular heart rhythms, shock, coma and death.

**How to store and dispose of medication**

- Keep out of the reach of children.
- Store away from heat, direct light and damp places.
- To safely dispose of unwanted pills: Do not pour in the toilet or sink (it will enter the water supply). To prevent children or pets from eating it, mix unwanted pills in a bag with a little water and inedible trash (such as coffee grounds or kitty litter) and throw in the trash.

**Quick facts**

Brand name	Trileptal (or Oxtellar for XR form)
Dose range	300-2,400 mg/day (usually divided twice/day)
Sizes	> Tabs: 150, 300, 600mg > XR Tabs* (brand only): 150, 300, 600mg > Liquid: 300 mg/5mL  *do not crush or chew XR tabs
Release date	1/14/2000
FDA-approval	Eilepsy (seizures)