



# PREGABALIN

## FACT SHEET

### What is pregabalin?

Pregabalin is a prescription drug used to manage a number of long-term conditions, including epilepsy, neuropathic pain and generalised anxiety disorder. Similar to benzodiazepines, the anxiolytic (relaxing) effects of pregabalin occur rapidly after administration.

### Pregabalin tablets

Pregabalin comes in tablet form, in 25mg, 50mg, 75mg, 100mg, 150mg, 200mg and 300mg hard capsules. The colour of the capsules vary depending on the manufacturers. Some street names include: Lyrica; Gabbies; Budweisers & Bud light.

### Pregabalin misuse

Internationally, pregabalin misuse has been reported among individuals attending addiction services and recreational drug users. The relaxant and sedative effects of pregabalin make it desirable for individuals to use outside of its prescribing recommendations. On online forums, pregabalin is reportedly taken in combination with other compounds in order to potentiate their effects, such as: benzodiazepines; alcohol; heroin; zopiclone; methadone; cannabis; LSD; mephedrone and amphetamines. Pregabalin was included on a list of new recreational psychoactive substances officially notified to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction/Europol European Early Warning System and has been monitored in this regard since 2009

Various reports suggest a growing illegal market for pregabalin, with it being easily accessed through illicit sources online, street dealers, and counterfeit/adulterated tablets being sold as pregabalin.

Pregabalin is sought after on the illicit drug market with tablets costing more than various other tablets available on the market.

### National Drug Treatment Centre Research

A study in 2014 by the National Drug Treatment Centre's (NDTC) Drug Analysis Laboratory confirmed that pregabalin abuse is taking place amongst the addiction services population. This study concludes that pregabalin has significant abuse potential and is an attractive drug to opioid dependent drug users. It further suggests that misuse of this prescription drug is a serious emerging issue which should be monitored carefully.

### Administration

Pregabalin tablets are intended for **oral use only**. When misused, pregabalin can be taken orally, intravenously (water soluble), rectally (plugging) or snorted (crushed up).

## Short-term effects

The effects of pregabalin can vary depending on the dose consumed. A range of experiences may be associated with pregabalin misuse, such as:

- Sedation
- Alcohol/GHB/benzodiazepine-like drunk effect
- Euphoria
- A sense of relaxation and calm
- Hallucinations
- Lowered inhibitions
- Fits/seizures
- Blurred vision
- Constipation
- Vomiting
- Trouble sleeping
- Psychosis
- Hypomania, confusion & memory impairment
- Tremors
- Peripheral oedema (swelling in limbs)
- Effects on libido
- Suicidal thoughts (in a small number of people)

Pregabalin has been misused for recreational purposes to achieve specific mindsets or emotional connections and to cope with opioid withdrawal. Pregabalin has also been used to enhance the euphoric effects of other drugs, like opiates.

## Dependence

Dependence has been reported among individuals using pregabalin outside of the prescribing recommendations. Tolerance and dependence can develop quickly to pregabalin.

## Withdrawal

Suddenly stopping the use of pregabalin can be dangerous. Withdrawal from pregabalin should be slow and under medical supervision. Abrupt discontinuation of pregabalin may be associated with withdrawal symptoms such as:

- Insomnia
- Nausea
- Headaches
- Diarrhea
- Sweating
- Tremors
- Severe cravings
- Depression
- Reemergence of pain or anxiety (If used to treat symptoms)
- Seizures

# Risks

Pregabalin misuse can have a direct effect on the central nervous system (CNS) resulting in:

- Drowsiness
- Sedation
- Respiratory depression
- Death

Pregabalin has adverse effects on the CNS when used in combination with other CNS depressants. If more than one CNS depressant is used in combination with pregabalin (eg, alcohol even in small amounts, antidepressants, anti-emetics, anti-epileptics, antihistamines, antipsychotics, anxiolytics, barbiturates, hypnotics, opioid analgesics) there is a risk of respiratory failure, coma or death.

# Deaths

Pregabalin and a similar drug, gabapentin, have been implicated in an increasing number of drug-related deaths across Europe in recent years.

In Ireland, pregabalin-related deaths increased by 86% from 14 in 2013 to 26 in 2014. They further increased from 26 in 2014 to 44 in 2015.

In 2015, there were 50 drug-related deaths in England and Wales where pregabalin was mentioned on the death certificate. Gabapentin was listed on 49.

The University of Helsinki reviewed pregabalin and gabapentin involvement in opioid overdose deaths, noting that pregabalin misuse with high doses is increasingly common and can be fatal when combined with opioids. Postmortem toxicology reports from Finland during 2010 to 2011 report that pregabalin was present in 316 cases.

# Treatment

Literature in relation to the treatment of pregabalin dependence is limited. It is recommended that treatment is medically supervised and a slow withdrawal plan can be discussed with the prescribing doctor to meet the needs of each individual presenting. A slow reduction of the substance allows withdrawal symptoms to be managed as the dose of the drug is reducing.

# Pregabalin harm reduction information

We recommend that all individuals should take pregabalin within its prescribing recommendations and under the supervision and advice of a doctor. If, however, you do decide to use pregabalin outside of its prescribing recommendations (misuse it) then the following points are important to consider:

## Use one drug at a time and never mix drugs

Pregabalin and gabapentin are prescription drugs that may cause sedation. They are both misused for the same effects as benzodiazepines or alcohol. Mixing benzodiazepines or alcohol with pregabalin and gabapentin can result in drowsiness, sedation, respiratory depression and death. The risk of using pregabalin outside of its prescribed recommendations is greatly increased when used in combination with opiates (codeine, heroin, methadone), benzodiazepines, tranquillisers, sleeping tablets and alcohol (even small amounts). Try to use one drug at a time or less of each substance.

## **Start with a test dose and wait before taking more**

Wait until the effects are felt and don't take more for at least 2 hours. Control the quantities of pregabalin taken in one session.

## **Think about tolerance**

Tolerance to pregabalin can develop quickly meaning more of the drug is needed to get the same effect. Try to keep track of your tolerance, write down how much you take down so you remember.

## **Know the quantity of the tablets you are taking**

Pregabalin comes in tablet form in 25mg, 50mg, 75mg, 100mg, 150mg, 200mg and 300mg capsules. If you are sourcing illicit tablets from a street dealer or through an illicit source online, always look at the dose displayed on the capsules. From an illicit source this dose may not be accurate but it may help you understand the dosages you are taking and may allow you avoid an overdose.

## **Don't suddenly stop**

If pregabalin use is reduced or suddenly stopped, tolerance to the substance can decrease quickly. A change in tolerance can result in overdose or death even if you restart at a lower dose. Sudden cessation of pregabalin can be dangerous and increase the risk of withdrawal symptoms. Withdrawal should be a slow tapered process under medical supervision from a doctor.

## **Illicit tablets**

You can never be fully sure of the contents of tablets bought from illicit sources online or street dealers. There is a possibility that pregabalin sourced without a prescription is counterfeit or adulterated. There is no form of quality control on these substances sourced illicitly.

## **Sedative Effects**

People describe the effects of pregabalin like a state of drunkenness similar to alcohol, benzodiazepines or GHB. Always use in trusted company and in a safe environment. Don't drive or operate heavy machinery after use.

## **Avoid injecting tablets**

Injecting tablets will seriously damage your veins and is associated with collapsed veins, clotted veins, infected skin and poor circulation.

# **Harm reduction advice for injecting tablets**

Our strong recommendation is to not inject pregabalin, but if you do:

## **Use a filter**

Tablets contain chemical fillers that are not meant to be injected intravenously and could damage veins. If injecting tablets always use a filter to try eliminate particles damaging your veins.

## **Use your own injecting equipment**

Use your own injecting equipment. Sharing injecting equipment increases the risk of getting blood borne viruses like HIV.

## **Start low and go slow**

Always start with a small test dose to see how you react to the drug and inject slowly.

## **Sterile water and possibly no citric**

Cook up with clean sterile water. Substances should be fully dissolved before injecting, citric may not be needed. Rotate sites to give each side a break.

# Harm reduction advice for safer snorting:

Tablets are not designed to be snorted.

Grind substance before snorting as it may have crystals or clumps in it.

- Place the tooter high up the nostril to avoid damaging the bottom of the nose.
- Use your own tooter. Sharing tooters increases the risk of spreading blood borne viruses like HIV.
- Bank notes are more likely to contain germs or traces of blood from other people. It is safer to use a clean straw cut in half or some rolled up cardboard.
- Alternate nostrils to give each side a break.

For information and support on drugs and alcohol visit [drugs.ie](https://www.drugs.ie) or call the HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline on **1800 459 459**