Carbamazepine for chronic facial pain

This leaflet aims to answer your questions about taking carbamazepine to treat your chronic facial pain. If you have any questions or concerns, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for you.

What is carbamazepine?
Carbamazepine is a medicine used to treat epilepsy. It can also be taken for nerve pain caused by diabetes (peripheral neuropathy) or if you have a painful condition of the face called trigeminal neuralgia. This medicine is only available on prescription. It’s normal to take carbamazepine 1-4 times a day. It usually takes a couple of weeks for carbamazepine to work. Carbamazepine is also called by the brand names Carbagen® and Tegretol®.

How do I take the medicine?
Try to space your doses of carbamazepine evenly through the day. For example, first thing in the morning, lunchtime, afternoon and in the evening. You can take it with or without food. To prevent the chance of side effects, your doctor will start you off on a low dose of carbamazepine. They will increase it gradually over a few days or weeks. Once you find a dose that suits you, it will usually stay the same - unless your condition changes, or your doctor starts you on a new medicine that may affect carbamazepine. Not everyone needs to have the maximum dose which is 1600mg daily for facial pain

How much will I take?

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What should I do if I forget to take the medicine?
If it’s less than eight hours before the next dose is due, it’s better to leave out the missed dose and take your next dose as normal. **Do not take two doses at the same time to make up for a forgotten dose.** If you forget doses often, it may help to set an alarm to remind you. You could also ask your pharmacist for advice on other ways to help you remember to take your medicine.

Are there any side effects?
Like all medicines, carbamazepine can cause side effects, although not everyone gets them.

**Skin rashes**
It's common to get a skin rash with carbamazepine. Most skin rashes are not serious.

If you notice flu-like symptoms, followed by a red or purple rash that spreads and forms blisters which peel off, tell your GP or go to the Emergency Department (A&E) straight away, as this can develop into a life-threatening skin condition called severe cutaneous adverse reactions. Severe cutaneous adverse reactions are a rare side effect of carbamazepine. It’s more likely to happen in the first eight weeks of using oxcarbazepine, or when the dose is increased too quickly. It can also happen if carbamazepine is stopped suddenly for a few days and then restarted at the same dose as before, without reducing the dose and then increasing it slowly again.

To help prevent the chance of you getting a rash that could be confused with severe cutaneous adverse reaction try not start any new medicines, foods or products during the first three months of treatment with carbamazepine. It's also good to not start using carbamazepine within two weeks of a viral infection, vaccination, or rash caused by something else.

**Common side effects**
Common side effects of carbamazepine include:
- feeling dizzy, sleepy or tired
- feeling sick (nausea) or being sick (vomiting)
- headaches
- dry mouth
- putting on weight.

These side effects may happen in more than 1 in 100 people. They're usually mild and go away by themselves.

**Serious side effects**
It's unusual to have serious side effects after taking carbamazepine. Tell a doctor straight away if you have:
- unusual bleeding or bruising, mouth sores, infections, a high temperature or sore throat - these can be signs of a blood disorder.
- thoughts of harming or killing yourself - a small number of people taking carbamazepine have had suicidal thoughts.
- a severe rash with flushing, blisters or ulcers - these can be signs of severe cutaneous adverse reactions.
- yellowing of skin or whites of eyes - these can be signs of a liver problem.
- pain in your joints and muscles, a rash across the bridge of your nose and cheeks, and problems breathing - these are signs of lupus (systemic lupus erythematosus).
Serious allergic reaction
In rare cases, it's possible to have a serious allergic reaction (anaphylaxis) to carbamazepine. Contact your GP or go to the Emergency Department straight away if:

- you get a skin rash that may include itchy, red, swollen, blistered or peeling skin
- you're wheezing
- you get tightness in the chest or throat
- you have trouble breathing or talking
- your mouth, face, lips, tongue or throat start swelling

These are not all the side effects of carbamazepine. For a full list see the leaflet inside your medicine packet.

Is there anything else I need to know?
There's no firm evidence carbamazepine is harmful to an unborn baby. However, for safety, your doctor will only advise you to take it in pregnancy if the benefits of the medicine outweigh the risks. Carbamazepine does pass into breast milk. There have been some reports of side effects in breastfed babies, including sleeping more and not feeding well.

There are some medicines that may interfere with the effects of carbamazepine. Please make sure your hospital doctor is aware of your other medications.

Do not take St John's wort, the herbal remedy for depression, while you are being treated with carbamazepine. This is because St John's wort may make carbamazepine less effective.

How do I get a repeat prescription?
Your GP will give you a repeat prescription for carbamazepine, which you can take to your local pharmacy. Please make sure you request your repeat prescription early enough so that you don’t run out or risk missing any doses of your medication.

Contact us
If you have any questions or concerns about carbamazepine, please contact Oral Medicine, t: 020 7188 4399, Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm.

For more information leaflets on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit w: www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline
If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline. t: 020 7188 8748, Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm