

Side effects of anti-epileptic drugs

All drugs, prescribed or non-prescribed, can have side effects. Even vitamins, supplements or herbal remedies can have side effects. This is no different with anti-epileptic drugs (AEDs). Most people who experience side effects find that they are mild and fade away once the body gets used to the drug.

If you experience side effects, it is important that you do not stop taking your AEDs. Always talk to your epilepsy specialist nurse, specialist or doctor first.

Common side effects

The most common side effects of AEDs are lethargy, drowsiness, tiredness, dizziness, headaches, or weight gain/loss. If you experience side effects which you find unacceptable, seek medical advice from your doctor or epilepsy specialist nurse. Do not stop taking your drugs without medical advice as a sudden withdrawal may lead to breakthrough seizures.

If you are experiencing any symptoms check the patient information leaflet that comes with your drug. This lists all the possible side effects of this drug. Remember, not everyone has side effects, and if they do, these are usually mild.

Side effects to watch out for

If you notice a skin rash or unexplained bruising, tell your doctor straight away. This could be a sign that you are allergic to the drug.

Ways to cut down side effects

Everyone reacts differently to drugs, so it may take more time to find the right dose or drug for you. If your side effects continue, your specialist may reduce the dose or you may be switched to a different AED.

It can sometimes take a while to find the right balance between a dose that controls your seizures and one which does not give you too many side effects. Keep a diary of your seizures and any side effects. This will allow your specialist to prescribe the most suitable AED or make changes to the dosage. You can get a free seizure diary from us.

If you take your AED exactly as prescribed, ie around the same time each day, you can often reduce any unwanted side effects. If you take your AED at times which are too close together, there may be too much of the drug in your system resulting in side effects.

Yellow card reporting scheme

If you experience an unusual side effect, you can report this by using the yellow card reporting scheme. Your doctor or epilepsy nurse can tell you whether a particular side effect should be reported, and they will usually do this on your behalf. For more information, go to <http://yellowcard.mhra.gov.uk/> or phone the Yellow Card hotline on 0808 100 3352.

Reliable sources of internet research

If you want to find out more about the particular drug(s) you are taking, use reputable websites only, such as:

- * **Electronic Medicines Compendium** www.medicines.org.uk/emc
- * **NHS** www.nhs.uk/medicines/

Interaction with other prescribed and non-prescribed drugs

If you are already on prescribed medication for another medical condition, or on the contraceptive pill, your doctor will carefully check that the AED does not interfere with this drug. If you take any over-the-counter medication including vitamins,

supplements, or herbal remedies, let your doctor know as these can sometimes interfere with AEDs and make them less effective.

Osteoporosis and osteomalacia

Long term use (usually over five years) of some AEDs can increase the risk of osteoporosis (brittle bones) or osteomalacia (thinning bones). It is thought that this may be due to the fact that some AEDs lead to a vitamin D deficiency. If you are on one of these drugs and your seizures are not controlled, you could be more likely to sustain a fracture during a seizure.

If bone loss is listed as a potential side effect, ask your specialist if you need a bone density test and/or whether you should be taking vitamin D or calcium supplements as a preventative measure.

Long term use of AEDs

Many people take AEDs safely for years; some even do for the rest of their lives. If you have been seizure free for a number of years, you can discuss the possibility of coming off these with your specialist. This does, however, depend on a number of factors, which need to be considered carefully. There is more information on this in our factsheet 'AEDs – are they for life?'.

Occasionally, a doctor may want to do a blood test to monitor kidney or liver function, particularly if you take a number of other drugs.