

# Baclofen

## What is baclofen, and how does it work?

Baclofen is a muscle relaxant and anti-spasm medication. It is used to reduce and relieve the muscle spasms that occur in conditions such as multiple sclerosis and spinal cord injuries. Preliminary research findings show promise for “off-label” use of baclofen, outside of its currently approved indications, to treat alcohol dependence. Specific circumstances, which your physician will discuss with you, may make this medication a good treatment option.



There is evidence that baclofen may help reduce the need to drink alcohol and reduce the addictive properties of alcohol. Baclofen may also reduce some alcohol withdrawal symptoms.

## How is baclofen taken?

Baclofen is started at a low dose and increased gradually until the optimum effect is achieved.

## What are the side-effects of baclofen?

Side-effects occur most often at the start of treatment. These effects may not last long, and can be reduced or stopped by reducing the dose—it is rarely necessary to stop taking the medication. Contact your physician if you experience any side-effects.

If you experience convulsions or abdominal pain with yellowing of the skin or eyes, stop taking the medication and call your physician or pharmacist. These are very rare side-effects. The most common side-effects of baclofen are: drowsiness, sedation, dizziness, weakness, fatigue and nausea

The following side-effects occur in 1% to 10% of people taking baclofen. Older adults and those with a history of psychiatric illness may experience more serious reactions such as hallucinations and confusion.

- headache
- loss of co-ordination
- insomnia
- speech problems

- constipation
- diarrhea
- retching or vomiting
- dry mouth and eyes
- low blood pressure
- light-headedness
- frequent difficult or painful urination
- bed-wetting
- lack of energy or exhaustion
- tremor
- breathing problems
- nasal congestion
- euphoric (“high”) mood
- depression
- confusion
- hallucinations or visual disturbances
- nightmares
- rashes or itching
- ankle swelling
- excessive sweating
- weight gain.

## Is it possible to become addicted to baclofen?

No. Baclofen is not habit forming or a drug of abuse. It does not cause patients to become physically or psychologically dependent.

## Could there be any reason why I can't take baclofen?

Before you take baclofen, speak with your physician if you have:

- diabetes
- kidney disease
- epilepsy
- stomach ulcer
- breathing problems
- liver disease
- poor brain circulation
- difficulty urinating
- a mental illness.

## What will happen if I drink alcohol while taking baclofen?



Baclofen does not:

- reduce the depressant effects of alcohol such as impaired co-ordination and judgment
- affect your blood alcohol level or “sober you up” if you drink
- change the way the body metabolizes (breaks down) alcohol, so it will not make you feel sick if you drink.

Because it is a central nervous system depressant, baclofen may add to the depressant effects of alcohol. It

may also decrease the pleasure you feel from drinking alcohol compared to what you have experienced in the past, and may decrease the desire to drink more.

## Can I take other medications with baclofen?

Baclofen interacts with some other medications, so discuss any medications you are currently taking with your physician and pharmacist so that possible interactions can be evaluated.

Notably, if you are on antidepressant you may be more sensitive to baclofen. Baclofen may reduce blood pressure if you are on anti-hypertensive medication or create confusion if you are on anti-parkinsonian medication. Your blood sugar level should be monitored if you have diabetes.

## What will happen if I become pregnant while taking baclofen?

There are no human studies on the use of baclofen in pregnancy. For that reason, if there is a possibility of becoming pregnant, use an effective method of birth control while taking baclofen. If you miss a menstrual period, report this to your physician at once and take a pregnancy test. If you become pregnant, you will need to alert your physician to discuss ongoing treatment options. Your physician will help you to abstain from alcohol during pregnancy. Your health should be monitored throughout your pregnancy, as should the health of your baby after delivery.

## Are there any safety concerns while taking baclofen?

Baclofen can cause dizziness, sedation and visual disturbances in some people. If this happens to you, do not drive a car, use machinery or do other things that require your full attention. If you are having surgery, a dental procedure or emergency treatment, be sure to inform the health care provider that you are taking baclofen.

## Should I take baclofen with a meal?

Baclofen can be taken with or without food. Some people like to time their dose with meals to help them remember to take the medication.



## What happens if I stop taking baclofen suddenly?

It is important not to stop taking baclofen suddenly. If you do, you may experience difficulty sleeping; nervousness; confusion; hallucinations; abnormal thinking or behaviour; convulsions, uncontrollable twitching or jerking or writhing movements; fast heartbeat; or high body temperature. There is also a potential risk of seizure if you stop taking the medication abruptly. Unless there are serious side-effects, the baclofen dose should be reduced slowly, over one to two weeks, to avoid these potential problems.

## What happens if I miss a dose?

If you miss a dose, take it as soon as you remember. If it is near the time for the next dose then do not take a double dose, but resume your normal schedule. Talk to your physician if you miss many doses.

## If I take baclofen, does it mean that I don't need other treatment for alcohol dependence?

No. Research has shown that medication for alcohol dependence is most effective when combined with counselling and/or mutual support groups.

## What is the relationship of baclofen to AA and other mutual support groups?

You can participate in support groups while taking baclofen. The medication is most likely to be effective for you if your goal is to stop drinking altogether. If other group members caution against taking any medications, refer them to the pamphlet "The AA Member—Medications and Other Drugs," which states that AA members should not "play doctor" and advise others on medication provided by medical practitioners or treatment programs.



## Dosage and cost

The dosage will be adjusted to your own need. It is standard to start with 5 mg three times a day (15 mg/day), increasing to 10 mg three times per day (30 mg/day). At this dosage, the cost will be around \$1 per day.