

Topiramate

What is topiramate, and how does it work?

Topiramate (Topamax) is a medication that has been available for a long time to treat migraines and seizures. Based on new research findings, topiramate is now being used “off-label,” or outside of its currently approved indications, to treat alcohol dependence. Specific circumstances, which your physician will discuss with you, may make this medication the first-choice treatment option.

Exactly how topiramate works in alcohol dependence is not known, but it is thought to reduce alcohol’s pleasurable effects and so helps people to abstain from alcohol. Topiramate can:



- reduce the number of heavy drinking days
- help you remain abstinent.

Counselling was an important component of these studies, and it is patients who are willing to take the medication every day as prescribed and take part in counselling who do best in treatment with this medication.

Topiramate can improve your liver function, if you’ve previously had liver problems. Topiramate does not treat alcohol withdrawal symptoms. Many patients need to undergo alcohol withdrawal management (“detox”) before starting this medication.

How is topiramate taken?

Topiramate is taken according to the following dosing schedule. The dose is increased gradually to avoid dose-dependent side-effects while the body adapts to tolerate the recommended dose, which is reached after eight weeks.

| Week | Morning (mg) | Afternoon (mg) | Daily (mg) |
|------|--------------|----------------|------------|
| 1 | 0 | 25 | 25 |
| 2 | 0 | 50 | 50 |

| Week | Morning (mg) | Afternoon (mg) | Daily (mg) |
|------|--------------|----------------|------------|
| 3 | 25 | 50 | 75 |
| 4 | 50 | 50 | 100 |
| 5 | 50 | 100 | 150 |
| 6 | 100 | 100 | 200 |
| 7 | 100 | 150 | 250 |
| 8 | 150 | 150 | 300 |

What are the side-effects of topiramate?

The side-effects reported included:

- skin numbness or tingling (51%)
- headache (24%)
- taste disturbance (23%)
- fatigue (22%)
- loss of appetite (20%)
- insomnia (19%)
- difficulty with concentration or attention (15%)
- nervousness (14%)
- difficulty with memory (13%)
- drowsiness (12%)
- diarrhea (12%)
- dizziness (12%)
- itching (10%)
- nausea (10%)
- indigestion (9%)
- flu-like symptoms (9%)
- sinusitis (8%)
- muscle pain (8%)
- injury (4%).

While these side-effects were usually mild and lasted a short time, some were severe enough to cause 19% of people to stop taking the medication.

The medication usually has no psychological effects, and users do not feel either “up” or “down.” You will have blood tests done before starting treatment, and regularly during treatment, to determine your suitability for beginning and continuing on topiramate. You should report any side-effects to your physician.

There are some important potential side-effects, some of them rare, to be aware of, including:

- cognitive side-effects, including difficulty with concentration, attention, memory and language, which may arise either during the phase of dose increases or with long-term use
- loss of appetite and weight loss
- osteoporosis, a condition in which bones can break more easily
- kidney stones, which can cause abdominal pain or blood in the urine (this risk can be reduced by remembering to drink plenty of water)
- decreased sweating and increased body temperature
- glaucoma, resulting in problems with eyesight and/or eye pain, within a few days to one month after starting the medication—if this occurs, stop the topiramate immediately.

Is it possible to become addicted to topiramate?

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

What will happen if I drink alcohol while taking topiramate?



Topiramate does not:

- reduce effects of alcohol such as impaired coordination and judgement
- 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.

Can I take other medications with topiramate?

Topiramate should not be taken with valproic acid, as the combination may increase ammonia levels, leading to impaired consciousness and/or cognitive function, lethargy or vomiting. If topiramate is used in conjunction with other anti-epileptic medications, it should be tapered slowly to avoid seizures.

Follow your physician’s or pharmacist’s directions if you are using topiramate with amitriptyline, anti-epileptic medications, some diabetes medications, diuretics (“water pills”), sleep or anxiety medications, antipsychotic

medications or opioid pain medications.

You should discuss any medications you are currently taking with your physician and pharmacist so that possible interactions can be evaluated.

Should I take topiramate with a meal?

Topiramate 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 topiramate suddenly?

Topiramate does not cause physical dependence, and you can stop taking it at any time without experiencing withdrawal symptoms. However, it should be tapered if you are also taking an anti-epileptic medication.

If I take topiramate, does it mean that I don’t need other treatment for alcohol dependence?

No. Research has shown that topiramate is most effective when combined with counselling and/or mutual support groups.

What is the relationship of topiramate to AA and other mutual-support groups?

You can participate in support groups while taking topiramate. In fact, one study showed that people who attended mutual support groups, such as AA, while taking topiramate had better outcomes. Topiramate is most likely to be effective for you if your goal is to stop drinking altogether.

If other mutual-support group members caution against taking any medications, you should 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 legitimate, informed medical practitioners or treatment programs.



Cost

The cost will depend of the dosage, and will be in the range of \$5 per day at the highest dosage.