

Anticonvulsant Drugs for Nerve Pain, Bipolar Disorder & Fibromyalgia: Choosing What's Right for You

What are anticonvulsant drugs?

Anticonvulsants are drugs used to treat seizures. They are also used to treat bipolar disorder, pain caused by nerve damage, and fibromyalgia.

Fibromyalgia is a condition involving symptoms of muscle pain, joint tenderness, fatigue, sleep problems, and a chronic low-grade, flu-like feeling. Fibromyalgia can be mild, moderate, or severe.

Bipolar disorder has two distinct phases: feeling very good (mania) and feeling very low (depression). In most cases, either mood can last for several weeks.

Do I need an anticonvulsant?

If you are diagnosed with bipolar disorder, nerve pain, or fibromyalgia, your doctor may suggest starting with other drugs or treatments. If these don't work, your doctor may then recommend an anticonvulsant drug. Sometimes doctors prescribe two anticonvulsants together.

What should I know before I take an anticonvulsant?

Anticonvulsant drugs cause side effects in half or more of people who use them. Each drug has different side effects. The most common side effects are:

- Feeling dizzy
- Feeling sleepy
- Nausea

The newer anticonvulsant drugs may not be better than the older ones.

More serious side effects include:

- Drop in blood cell counts
- Failure of the liver or the pancreas
- Life-threatening skin rashes
- Thoughts about suicide


Some people think that the newer anticonvulsants are safer than the older ones. They also think the newer ones have fewer side effects. But there are not any large studies that show this to be true. In fact, some of the newer drugs may have more side effects, including swelling of the hands and feet, weight gain, blurry vision, trouble concentrating, and forgetfulness.

Anticonvulsant drugs should not be taken with some medicines or if you are pregnant. There are some medicines that you cannot take with an anticonvulsant. Tell your doctor about any other medicines, vitamins, and herbal supplements that you are taking.

You should also not take anticonvulsants if you are pregnant or may become pregnant. They can cause birth defects.


Our advice:

We compared cost, safety, and how well anticonvulsant drugs work to treat bipolar disorder, nerve pain, and fibromyalgia. We chose these five as *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs*. All are available as generics.

 **Carbamazepine**—for manic phases of bipolar disorder and nerve pain

 **Divalproex**—for manic phases of bipolar disorder

 **Gabapentin**—for fibromyalgia and nerve pain

 **Lamotrigine**—for depressive phases of bipolar disorder









 **Valproic acid**—for manic phases of bipolar disorder



Anticonvulsant Drugs

Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs are in blue. We recommend these drugs because they work as well and are as safe as the other drugs, and they cost less. The dollar symbol **\$** means the dose of that drug may be available for a low monthly cost through programs offered by large chain stores, like Costco, CVS, Kmart, Kroger, Sam's Club, Target, Walmart, and Walgreens. Some of these stores have restrictions or charge a membership fee, however.

Our analysis is based on a scientific review by the Oregon Health and Science University-based Drug Effectiveness Review Project. This is a summary of a longer, more detailed report you can find at www.CRBestBuyDrugs.org.

Best Buy	Generic Name & Strength	Brand Name	Pills per Day	Avg Cost per Month	Recommended Use
	Carbamazepine 200 mg tablet	Generic	Three	\$19 	Manic phase of bipolar disorder; nerve pain
	Carbamazepine 100 mg SR sustained-release tablet	Carbatrol	Two	\$134	
	Divalproex 125 mg tablet	Depakote	Three	\$140	
	Divalproex 125 mg tablet	Generic	Three	\$66	Manic phase of bipolar disorder
	Gabapentin 100 mg capsule	Neurontin	Three	\$99	
	Gabapentin 100 mg capsule	Generic	Three	\$33 	Fibromyalgia and nerve pain
	Lamotrigine 25 mg tablet	Lamictal	One	\$196	
	Lamotrigine 25 mg tablet	Generic	One	\$92	Depressive phase of bipolar disorder
	Pregabalin 25 mg capsule	Lyrica	Three	\$310	
	Valproic Acid 250 mg capsule	Generic	Three	\$41	Manic phase of bipolar disorder
	Valproic Acid 250 mg delayed-release capsule	Stavzor	Three	\$233	
	Zonisamide 25 mg capsule	Zonegran	One	\$37	
	Zonisamide 25 mg capsule	Generic	One	\$14 	

Prices are based on nationwide retail average prices for April 2011. *Consumer Reports Best Buy Drugs* obtained prices from data provided by Wolters Kluwer Pharma Solutions, which is not involved in our analysis or recommendations.