

Pregabalin

Guidance for people working with Pregabalin users





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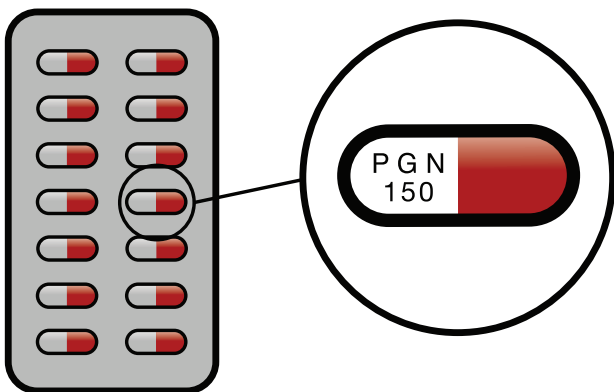
What's Pregabalin?

Pregabalin is a drug originally used to prevent focal seizures or 'fits' in people with epilepsy. It is one of the gabapentinoid family of medicines that also includes Gabapentin. It comes in different strengths from 25mg to 300mg capsules.

What other names has it got?

There are trade names for it just as diazepam has trade names like Valium[®]. The most well-known trade name for Pregabalin is Lyrica[®].

Most drugs that gain popularity among recreational users also get street names. 'Budweisers' and 'Buds' are common street names for Pregabalin, supposedly because some 300mg capsules are red and white in colour and their effect is a bit like alcohol. Other street names include 'Fizers'.



Who this booklet is aimed at?

This is primarily for people who work with people who use Pregabalin that is not prescribed to them.

However it may also be useful to people who overuse their prescribed amount, people who take Pregabalin that isn't prescribed for them or for people who care about a Pregabalin user.

(If you are under 16 you should only use this booklet with support from a suitably qualified youth worker, social worker or addictions worker.)



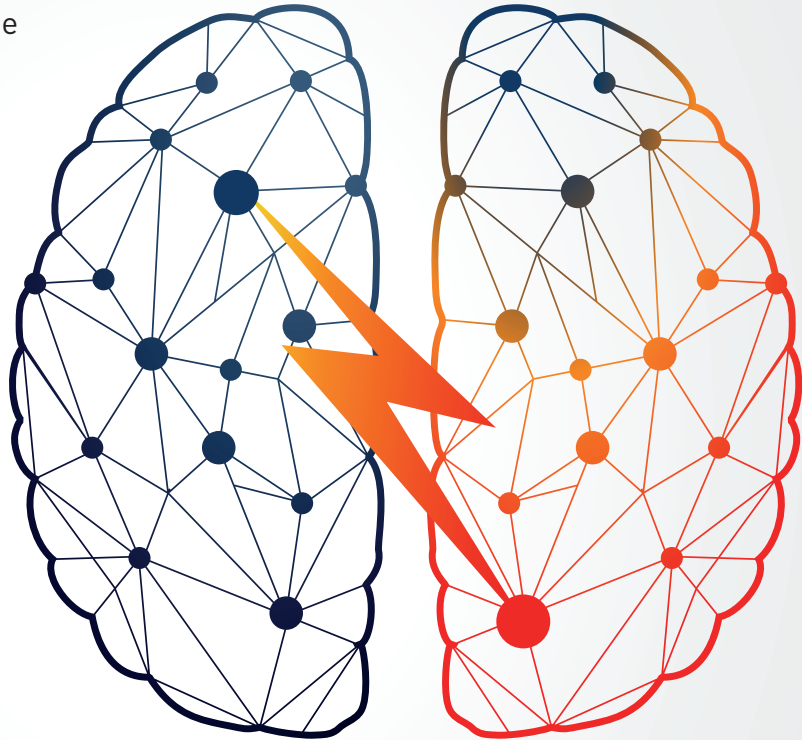
Why have we produced this booklet?

In the last few years the number of people who are prescribed Pregabalin has soared. A number of addiction services in NI say that they have had contact with people who have been struggling with their misuse of Pregabalin. Hospitals¹ have also been treating people who have taken too much Pregabalin and become unwell. And, there has also sadly been a steep rise in the number of people who have died after taking Pregabalin overdoses.²

What's Pregabalin used for?

Pregabalin is not only used for the treatment of epilepsy but also for nerve (neuropathic) pain and for a type of anxiety called Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD).

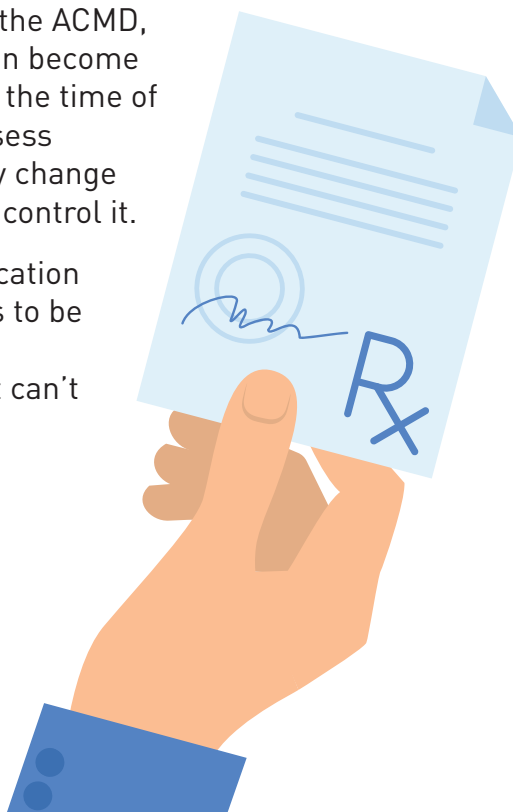
When it was used for epilepsy alone it was quite rare but since it started to be used for the other conditions more people have heard of it and some have tried it even though it isn't prescribed to them.



The law bit

In early 2016 the UK's chief advisory body to the government on drugs, the ACMD, recommended that Pregabalin become a class C controlled drug³. At the time of writing it is not illegal to possess Pregabalin, however this may change if the Home Office decides to control it.

It is a Prescription Only Medication (POM). This means that it has to be issued by a prescriber and dispensed by a pharmacist, it can't be bought in a pharmacy.



Effects

The effects of Pregabalin depend on the dose taken and tolerance to it. The **common** effects are⁴:

Positive:

- Euphoria
- Lifted mood
- Giddiness
- Relaxation
- Increased motivation
- Lower inhibitions
- Surroundings appear more interesting

Neutral:

- Light headed
- Mild visual distortions
- Vivid imagination
- Disinhibition

Negative:

- Dizziness
- Muddled thoughts
- Clumsiness
- Drowsiness
- Thirst
- Weight gain
- Swelling of the extremities
- Chest pain
- Wheezing

As you can see some of these are unpleasant effects whilst others may be pleasant or neutral. Many of them are initial effects and they reduce or disappear as tolerance builds. Whilst these are the common effects it is important to remember that there are considerable risks when taking Pregabalin, sometimes including overdose and even death.





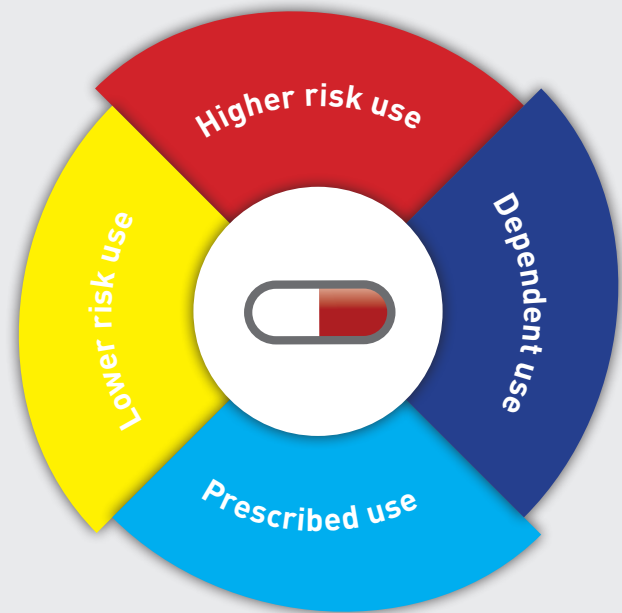
Did you know?

- The average cost per prescription is £63.60 making it an expensive drug compared to many others.⁵
- Prescribing rates in prisons are more than double that in the wider community⁶
- In the UK, Pregabalin prescribing has increased by 350% in just 5 years!⁷
- It increases the effects of other depressant type drugs and as a result, it is implicated in more and more overdose deaths.^{8,9}
- It is more frequently prescribed in NI than anywhere else in the UK.¹⁰
- In NI, Pregabalin prescriptions cost a total of £17m each year.¹¹
- The number of Pregabalin prescriptions issued in Belfast increased 46% between 2011 and 2015.¹²
- One addiction service in Belfast found that the number of people asking for help with their Pregabalin use rose from less than 5 in 2012 to 70 in 2014.¹³
- When it was first introduced it was claimed that there was little or no chance that people could become dependent on Pregabalin (just like heroin and diazepam before it!)
- In the USA it can be used to treat Fibromyalgia.
- It is now thought that people who are dependent on Pregabalin do experience withdrawal symptoms when they stop taking it.¹⁴
- As far back as 1997 there have been reports of Pregabalin being misused.
- In 2013, 10 people had attended the Emergency Department of 1 Belfast Hospital in the preceding year after taking Pregabalin/experiencing severe side effects from Pregabalin.¹⁵
- By February 2017 hospitalisations were occurring in other places such as in Altnagelvin Hospital. In the Derry/Londonderry area, clusters of 3-5 people who had Pregabalin which they called 'Street diazepam', became unwell in house party settings and were taken to hospital.
- Buying on the street can be very expensive, sometimes as much as £3 for a 300mg capsule.
- Whether people buy Pregabalin on the street or online, neither are guaranteed to contain Pregabalin and could contain other potentially dangerous substances instead.
- Doses of Pregabalin used to achieve a psychoactive effect range from 200-5000mg.¹⁶
- One study in Bristol found that Pregabalin completely removes opioid tolerance in mice. Although it is unclear whether the same is the case in humans, it remains possible. This means that dependent opioid users are potentially at risk of opioid overdose after taking Pregabalin, because it removes their pre-existing tolerance to the opioids.¹⁷

Who uses it and why?

As well as people who are prescribed Pregabalin for epilepsy, nerve pain and anxiety, Pregabalin is used by others who want to experience its effects. Some say these are pleasant, like a mixture of alcohol and diazepam (a benzodiazepine).

There are different types of use and user.



Lower risk use – people who use it to get a buzz, and very often do not experience any problems as a result. For example, someone who uses a low dose on a weekly basis or less frequently.

However, some people whose use is recreational can experience harm. For example, someone who uses once a month but at high doses. This carries the risk of harm or actual harm. Such a person is moving into the higher risk use category.

Higher risk use – these people use to get a buzz but do experience problems. Their use is likely to be frequent but also the way they take it, what they mix it with, the dose they take or the things that happen when they do, lead to negative consequences.

A different sub-group of harmful use could even be dependent on Pregabalin i.e. those using high doses for prolonged periods and experience withdrawal symptoms if they stop using.

Dependent use – tolerance to Pregabalin rises quickly and can lead to dependence which may in turn lead to withdrawal symptoms (see below list) when the person stops taking it. Some dependent users experience harm for example, overdose.

The main reason for dependence is using for a long period with no 'days off'. Tolerance rises quickly to this drug. This isn't usually an issue if the drug is prescribed and taken as directed by the prescriber, as a tapering off period will be agreed between the patient and prescriber so that withdrawal is safe and not unnecessarily uncomfortable.

There is evidence to suggest that people who have a history of alcohol or drug problems may well be likely to develop problems with Pregabalin¹⁸.

**Withdrawal symptoms:**

- anger and irritability
- nausea and stomach cramps
- anxiety and panic
- restlessness
- sweating
- suicidal thoughts
- poor concentration
- sleep problems
- aches
- chills
- crying spells
- feeling like a zombie, unreal
- diarrhoea
- dizziness
- tiredness
- headaches
- hot flushes

Not everyone who is dependent on Pregabalin will experience significant withdrawal symptoms. Some do and they may experience quite a few of the above. We will discuss how to reduce the chances of these unpleasant symptoms later.

Risks

Like with all drug use there may be risks involved in taking Pregabalin. The only way to avoid all the risks is not to take it.

The main risks are:

- Becoming very intoxicated
- Accidental falls, trips
- Overdose, especially seizures
- Birth defects in children if taken by a pregnant mother¹⁹
- Dependence
- Problem use²⁰
- Death^{21,22,23}



Positives

No-one takes a drug which isn't prescribed to them because they expect it to feel awful. Pregabalin can give a pleasant buzz²⁴ especially the first few times it is taken. So when you are discussing someone's Pregabalin use with them, it is important to bear in mind that there are good things about using it as well as the risk of harm. It is a balance between the risks, benefits, effects and consequences from that person's perspective.

Some people believe that Pregabalin helps them to manage the withdrawal symptoms from other drugs like alcohol, heroin or diazepam and comedowns from stimulant drugs.



What can I do?

The best way to avoid all risk is to not take any drug which isn't prescribed to you, and take those drugs which are prescribed to you as directed. However we know that some people take drugs regardless, so if that describes someone you work with, there are some things you can do to help them reduce their risks.

Some behaviours and situations tend to increase the chances of a negative outcome, and this applies to using Pregabalin as well. No-one deliberately takes a drug to have a bad experience, but unfortunately sometimes even experienced drug users do come to harm. And that is why we talk about reducing harm, because **no-one** is invincible.



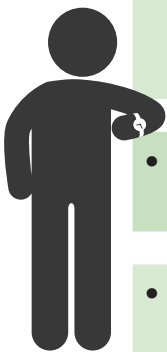
Engaging with people about their Pregabalin use

- Ensure you and your colleagues are as well informed as possible – circulate this document to any colleagues who work with Pregabalin users.
- If you suspect an individual may be taking Pregabalin, do ask the question in a non-judgemental way, and advise them that if they are taking Pregabalin, you may be able to give them useful advice on reducing the risks.
- If someone tells you they take Pregabalin, ask them about their current drug taking practices, and work with them to identify how they can reduce their risks (see harm reduction advice below) This should be a two way conversation. See harm reduction advice on pages 13-15.
- Gauge which sort of user they are (see the 'Who uses it and why?' section). Do they just want to get a buzz and don't think too much about the risks? Or do they do their homework before deciding what to take, how much and how often?
- Encourage them to tell you what they already know about reducing risks – they may know a lot of harm reduction advice already, and getting them to talk about how to take drugs more safely may encourage them to do it.
- Provide them with printed information. Extern have produced a booklet aimed at people who use Pregabalin, and copies can be obtained from Chris Rintoul by emailing chris.rintoul@extern.org or telephone 028 90 840 555

Harm Reduction Advice

Here are a few pointers you could use to encourage them to reduce risks as far as possible:

	Tick when complete
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Start low and go slow – dose is vitally important no matter what way a person takes it. Someone who has no tolerance will achieve a mild buzz from 25-75mg orally, using more can be unpleasant and even dangerous. All of the capsules can be opened up to allow for some degree of accuracy when dosing. You could suggest they keep both parts of the capsule so that they can put any unused powder back in it with a paper funnel for later use 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advise them not to be daft – competition to see who can take the most drugs can end in disaster. Tell them to avoid pressure to use more Pregabalin than they know will do the job they want, it’s them who will pay the price, not others. Overdoses have been reported from doses at and above 600mg 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage them to swallow – it’s by far the safest way to take most drugs. And because Pregabalin is manufactured to be swallowed, it means they can predict the effect more easily 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help them to understand tolerance – the amount of Pregabalin needed to achieve the desired effect. If tolerance has reduced the person shouldn’t go straight back in to using what they used to; they could overdose 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remind them that it lasts for hours – swallowed Pregabalin is active in the body for at least 12 hours 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure they know to wait for the peak effects to taper off before redosing – normally at least 2 hours 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If they are injecting Pregabalin²⁵ – get them to seek support from your local Low Threshold Service for injecting drug users 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Instead of starting to inject – advise them to try to ‘plug’, ‘stuff’, ‘bangle’ or UYB (rectal insertion of the drug, no needle required). Usually this alternative to injecting gives almost as great a rush and carries very few risks except overdose. Encourage them to avoid crossing a line to injecting at all costs 	<input type="checkbox"/>



<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If they are snorting Pregabalin – tell them to alternate nostrils, not to share straws, to use a clean straw never a bank note, and rack out lines on a clean surface. Use a nasal douche after snorting 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get them to avoid taking a mixture of drugs - mixing different types of drugs with Pregabalin increases the risk of accidental overdose. Using any benzodiazepine, any opioid or alcohol together with Pregabalin is especially risky. The respiratory system can shut down without the person knowing, leading to death 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help them to plan for the come down – if a person uses Pregabalin to reduce the comedown from stimulant drugs they need to be careful about mixing it on the back end of stimulant use. This is because of the cardiovascular and other risks associated with the earlier stimulant but mostly if there are a range of other CNS depressant drugs used along with Pregabalin to manage the stimulant comedown. For example taking stimulants, then diazepam and Pregabalin. When alcohol is added at any stage of the episode the risks increase again. Cannabis is a safer comedown drug, but obviously not totally risk free 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ok so they're going to mix anyway – the choice is theirs after all. Encourage them to use less of each drug if they can, to be as accurate in their dosing as possible with each of them and to know their tolerance to each one of them 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage users to look after their mates – if they notice anyone getting into difficulties, ask them not to leave the group or let them wander off. Remember that they are more likely to look after each other if they believe the others will do the same for them 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask them to call an ambulance if there's a problem – sometimes overdoses happen quickly so don't waste time 	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If someone is pregnant or might be pregnant – tell them not to use Pregabalin! They could have a baby with major birth defects. If they're sexually active encourage them to use effective contraception methods to avoid getting pregnant, it isn't worth the risk. Likewise they shouldn't use if they are breastfeeding as this can also harm the baby 	<input type="checkbox"/>



<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Advise them not to use every day – tolerance will rise quickly so it'll cost them a lot more in the longer term to achieve the same effect. If use is weekly or twice weekly they are more likely to be able to avoid dependence	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Give them a tip on sourcing – try to source from the same person or supplier each time to get a consistent product. Remember that there are very good fakes sold as Pregabalin that may or may not contain it, at unreliable doses, and may in fact contain much more dangerous or unpredictable substances. This applies to online sourcing as well.	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• However if they are dependent.... – tell them not to stop taking Pregabalin suddenly. Going into withdrawal can be unpleasant and they are likely to use again to prevent these symptoms. First, get them to a stable daily dose, then gradually reduce that by around 50mg each week and get support from one of the services in the next section	<input type="checkbox"/>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Tell them not to do anything they would avoid after drinking alcohol or taking benzos – examples of this are drive, look after children, and operate machinery. This is especially important for people who want to achieve a big buzz. This is less relevant for people who have achieved a stable dose and tolerance to Pregabalin.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Identify the things they can/could do from the above tips and tick them off.



Sources of further information and help?

Low Threshold Services can provide people who use drugs (or alcohol) harmfully and need support or advice on issues such as harm reduction, housing and debt.

Let Pregabalin users know they can contact their local Low Threshold Services at:

- **Belfast Trust area**
(Belfast Drug Outreach Team):
(028) 9504 7301
- **Northern Trust area**
(Extern):
(028) 2568 9601
- **Southern Trust area**
(Extern):
(028) 2568 9601
- **South Eastern Trust area**
(Simon Community):
074 3575 4307 / 074 3575 4302
- **Western Trust area:**
 - **Derry area**
(De Paul)
(028) 7136 5259
 - **Fermanagh and Omagh areas**
(Arc Healthy Living Centre)
(028) 6862 8741
 - **Limavady area**
(Housing First)
(028) 71371849

DrugWise:

www.drugwise.org.uk/pregabalin



Drugs.ie:

www.drugs.ie/pregabalin



If someone is unwell as a result of taking Pregabalin call an ambulance without delay on 999

If someone becomes distressed and in despair please ensure that they know the contact details for Lifeline, www.lifelinehelpline.info a free 24-hour service: 0808 808 8000



Credits

We wish to acknowledge the invaluable help we received from local Pregabalin users.

Without their expertise and insight, we would not have been able to produce this booklet.

Glossary of terms

Benzo/Benzodiazepine – Any of a family of minor tranquilizers that act against anxiety and convulsions and produce sedation and muscle relaxation.

Dependent use – Using a drug to prevent withdrawal occurring

Epilepsy – A disorder of the nervous system that can cause people to suddenly become unconscious and to have violent, uncontrolled movements of the body

Gabapentin – An anticonvulsant used in treatment of seizures

Gabapentinoid – A family of drugs used in the treatment of seizures

Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD) – A persistent, excessive, and unrealistic worry about everyday things

Harmful use – Use of a drug that causes harms to the person e.g. an overdose

Low Threshold Service – A proactive, outreach service which aims to engage with active alcohol/drug users who may not want to completely stop using substances, and assists them to reduce associated risks

Lyrica® - A branded product containing Pregabalin

Neuropathic pain – Nerve pain

Overdose – Taking too much of a drug and experiencing harm as a result

Prescribed use – Taking a medication prescribed to you by a doctor in the way advised by them

Recreational use – Taking a drug occasionally for pleasure

Taper – Gradually reduce the dose of a drug over time

Tolerance – The amount of a drug needed to achieve a particular effect

Withdrawal – The process of a drug leaving the body, often leading to unpleasant or sometimes even dangerous effects

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