Epilepsy medicines and pregnancy

Introduction
Epilepsy medicines and birth problems
Finding out more

Introduction
This information is to give you a general guide to how taking epilepsy medicines when you are pregnant may affect your unborn baby.

Most women with epilepsy have a normal pregnancy and deliver a healthy baby. However, your epilepsy and epilepsy medicines may slightly increase your risk of having a baby with a birth problem. Some epilepsy medicines, taken at low doses, carry very little extra risk. The risks may increase, depending on the type, dose and number of medicines you take.

Medical professionals advise that you avoid getting pregnant until after you have had individual advice about any risks to your pregnancy. This advice should be from a medical professional who has a special interest in epilepsy and pregnancy. You can ask your family doctor or epilepsy specialist or nurse to arrange this for you. With careful planning before you get pregnant, the risks can usually be reduced.

Epilepsy Action has more information about planning a pregnancy.

Taking your epilepsy medicines during pregnancy
If you find out that you are pregnant, and you have not planned it, do not stop taking your epilepsy medicines. This could cause you to have more frequent or severe seizures. This would put you and your baby at higher risk than if you continued taking your medicines.1 Speak to your family doctor as soon as possible. They will be able to make sure that you get the help and advice you need.

Epilepsy medicines and birth problems
Birth problems that are associated with some epilepsy medicines include minor and major congenital malformations and neurodevelopmental problems. These are explained below.

Minor congenital abnormalities
These are birth defects that don’t necessarily need treatment and might not be permanent. Examples include small fingers, small toenails and facial abnormalities, such as wide spread eyes.2

Minor congenital abnormalities are not linked to any particular epilepsy medicine. However, if you have epilepsy or take epilepsy medicines your baby has a slightly

higher risk of having one. The risk of epilepsy medicines causing these seems to be greatest during the first three months of pregnancy.

**Major congenital malformations**

These are birth problems that need medical treatment. They range from spina bifida or a hole in the heart to a cleft palate (where the roof of the mouth is not correctly joined).  

In women who don’t have epilepsy, around one or two babies in every hundred will have a major congenital malformation. In women who have epilepsy, but don’t take epilepsy medicines, around two babies in every hundred born will have a major congenital malformation. For women who take epilepsy medicines, the risks are higher.

The UK Epilepsy and Pregnancy Register was set up to find out more about having epilepsy and taking epilepsy medicines during pregnancy. The information in the table below has information from the register’s 2011 findings. It does not have information about every epilepsy medicine available because, at the moment, there is not enough information available.

**Table to show the risks of epilepsy medicines causing major congenital malformations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If you take just one epilepsy medicine</th>
<th>Epilepsy medicine</th>
<th>Daily dose</th>
<th>Approximate risk</th>
<th>% risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>carbamazepine</td>
<td>any</td>
<td>two in a hundred</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lamotrigine</td>
<td>below 400 mg</td>
<td>two in a hundred</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lamotrigine</td>
<td>above 400 mg</td>
<td>six in a hundred</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sodium valproate</td>
<td>below 1,000 mg</td>
<td>five in a hundred</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sodium valproate</td>
<td>above 1,000 mg</td>
<td>nine in a hundred</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If you take more than one epilepsy medicine</th>
<th>Epilepsy medicine combination</th>
<th>Approximate risk</th>
<th>% risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sodium valproate with any other</td>
<td>nine in a hundred</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>any combination without sodium valproate</td>
<td>four in a hundred</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

The risk of epilepsy medicines causing your unborn baby to have a major congenital malformation seems to be greatest during the first three months of pregnancy.9

**Neurodevelopmental problems**

*Neurodevelopment* describes the development of a range of skills such as language and communication, and behaviour. There is a higher risk of your child having a neurodevelopmental problem if you take sodium valproate during pregnancy. 10

Neurodevelopmental problems become more obvious over time. So you may not be aware that your child has neurodevelopmental problems until they are a few years old.

**Finding out more**

If you would like more information about the risks of epilepsy medicines in pregnancy, contact the UK Epilepsy and Pregnancy Register:

Freephone 0800 389 1248
Website: epilepsyandpregnancy.co.uk

**About this publication**

This information is written by Epilepsy Action’s advice and information team, with guidance and input from people living with epilepsy and medical experts. If you would like to know where our information is from, or there is anything you would like to say about the information, please contact us.

Epilepsy Action makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of information but cannot be held liable for any actions taken based on this information.

Date: January 2013; Due for review: January 2015
Code: F044.02

**Our thanks**

Epilepsy Action would like to thank Dr Jim Morrow, Consultant Neurologist at The Royal Hospital, Belfast and Beth Irwin, Epilepsy Nurse/Midwife, The Royal Hospital, Belfast, for their contribution to this information.

Dr Jim Morrow and Beth Irwin have no conflict of interest to declare.

**Your support**

We hope you have found this fact sheet helpful. As a charity, we rely on donations to provide our advice and information. If you would like to make a donation, here are some ways you can do this.

- Visit www.epilepsy.org.uk/donate

---


• Text **ACT NOW** to **70700** (This will cost you £5 plus your usual cost of sending a text. Epilepsy Action will receive £5.)
• Send a cheque payable to Epilepsy Action to the address below.

Did you know you can also become a member of Epilepsy Action from less than £1 a month? To find out more, visit www.epilepsy.org.uk/join or call 0113 210 8800.

**Epilepsy Helpline**
Freephone 0808 800 5050, text 0753 741 0044, email helpline@epilepsy.org.uk, tweet @epilepsyadvice

**Contact details**
Epilepsy Action, Gate Way Drive, Yeadon, Leeds LS19 7XY, UK, +44 (0)113 210 8800. A registered charity (No. 234343) and company limited by guarantee (No. 797997) in England.

© Copyright Epilepsy Action