

## Carbamazepine for Trigeminal Neuralgia

*\*A guide for patients\**

---

### What is Carbamazepine?

Carbamazepine (brand name: Tegretol) is a medication commonly used to treat nerve pain, especially trigeminal neuralgia — a condition that causes sudden, sharp facial pain. It's considered the first-line treatment for this condition due to its effectiveness in calming the irritated nerve.

### How It Works

Carbamazepine operates by stabilising the electrical activity in the brain and nerves. It inhibits the sodium channels in overactive nerve cells, thereby reducing the misfiring of pain signals that trigger trigeminal neuralgia attacks. In other words, this action prevents the inappropriate transmission of pain signals. Essentially, it reduces the intensity of a faulty wire causing a short circuit.

### Typical Dosing and Escalation

- Starting dose: Usually 100 to 200 mg once or twice a day, depending on your age, health, and other medications.
- Tablet sizes : 100 mg and 200 mg immediate release (IR) and 200 mg or 400 mg slow or controlled release (CR)
- Increasing the dose: Your doctor will gradually increase the dose every 5 to 7 days to help your body adjust and reduce side effects.
- Target dose: Often ranges from 400 mg to 1200 mg per day, split into two to three doses, stopping at the lowest effective dose with the fewest side effects. Typically the CR form is better as it achieves a more even dosing throughout the day, though some people find the IR form to work better.
- Always follow your doctor's instructions. Never change the dose or stop the medication without medical advice.

### Common Side Effects

Most people tolerate oxcarbazepine well, but some may experience:

- Fatigue or drowsiness
- Dizziness, balance or coordination issues
- Nausea / upset stomach and vomiting
- Blurred or double vision
- Urinary retention / constipation

## Rare (But Serious) Side Effects

- Raised intraocular pressure (avoid if already present)
- Cardiac rhythm disturbance (avoid if you already have a condition known as 'heart block').
- Increased risk of suicidal thoughts and behaviour
- Low sodium levels (may cause confusion, fatigue, or headaches — requires regular blood tests).
- Rarely, some people may develop a skin rash or severe reaction known as Steven Johnson syndrome (SJS). This is more common in people of Han Chinese ancestry, as they are more likely to carry the HLA-B\*1502 gene which is a risk factor. If you are of Han Chinese ancestry, a blood test should be done prior to check for this gene. The majority (90%) of people who develop this severe reaction do so within the first few months of taking the drug. Cease the drug immediately if you notice a rash and contact your GP that day.
- Carbamazepine must be avoided if you are taking a monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOIs).
- Carbamazepine is teratogenic (Category D) and must be strictly avoided in pregnancy.

## Monitoring

- Carbamazepine is metabolized to an active ingredient by the liver. Occasionally it can lead to liver dysfunction and suppression of your immune white cells (agranulocytosis) or red cells (aplastic anaemia) requiring periodic blood tests. If these occur, you will likely need to discontinue the drug.
- Carbamazepine can induce liver enzymes, which can make your liver break down other medications more quickly such as the oral contraceptive pill (OCP) and the blood thinner warfarin. If you are taking either of these, advise your doctor as it may alter the required dosage of these medications.

## Important Tips

- Take with food to help prevent nausea.
- Do not cease the medication suddenly, sudden withdrawal can cause serious issues.
- Let your doctor know about all medications or supplements you're taking.
- Do not drive or operate heavy machinery until you know how the medication affects you.
- If you miss a dose, take it as soon as you remember — but skip it if it's almost time for the next one.

## Final Word

Carbamazepine is time-tested and the most effective drug for reducing or eliminating trigeminal neuralgia pain. The key is to start low, go slow, and stay in touch with your care team about how you're feeling. If you have any questions or concerns, don't hesitate to reach out.

Content on this website is provided for education and information purposes only. Information about a therapy, service, product or treatment does not imply endorsement and is not intended to replace advice from your doctor or other registered health professional. Content has been prepared for Victorian residents and wider Australian audiences, and was accurate at the time of publication. Readers should note that, over time, currency and completeness of the information may change. All users are urged to always seek advice from a registered health care professional for diagnosis and answers to their medical questions.