

# Newer drugs for epilepsy in adults

**Understanding NICE guidance –  
information for adults with epilepsy,  
their families and carers, and the public**

March 2004



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## **Newer drugs for epilepsy in adults**

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### **To order copies**

Copies of this booklet can be ordered from the NHS Response Line; telephone 0870 1555 455 and quote reference number N0454. A version in Welsh and English is also available, reference number N0455. Mae fersiwn yn Gymraeg ac yn Saesneg ar gael hefyd, rhif cyfeirnod N0455. The NICE technology appraisal on which this information is based, *Newer drugs for epilepsy in adults*, is available from the NICE website ([www.nice.org.uk/TA076guidance](http://www.nice.org.uk/TA076guidance)). A short version of the guidance (a 'quick reference guide') is also available on the website ([www.nice.org.uk/TA076quickrefguide](http://www.nice.org.uk/TA076quickrefguide)) and from the NHS Response Line, reference number N0453.

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## What is NICE guidance?

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) is part of the NHS. It produces guidance (recommendations) on the use of medicines, medical equipment, diagnostic tests and clinical and surgical procedures within the NHS in England and Wales.

To produce this guidance, NICE looks at how well the medicine, equipment or procedure works and also how well it works in relation to how much it costs. This process is called an appraisal. The appraisal process involves the manufacturers of the medicine or equipment for which guidance is being produced and the organisations that represent the healthcare professionals, patients and carers who will be affected by the guidance.

NICE was asked to look at the available evidence on the use of some relatively new medicines for epilepsy in adults. NICE was asked to provide guidance that will help the NHS in England and Wales decide when these newer medicines should be used.

## What is epilepsy?

People with epilepsy have repeated seizures (sometimes called fits), when the brain stops working normally for a few minutes. There are many different types of seizure. One is tonic-clonic seizures, in which the body becomes rigid for up to a minute, then the muscles start to contract and relax in quick succession, resulting in jerking movements of the limbs for a few minutes. When this stops, the body goes limp and the person slowly regains consciousness.

Medicines are the main treatment for epilepsy. These are called antiepileptic drugs, and the aim is to stop a person having seizures. Some antiepileptic drugs work better for one type of epilepsy than another, or for some people better than for others. Finding the best drug for each person can mean trying more than one drug, to see which works best and has the least unwanted effects. It is not always possible to stop a person's seizures completely.

## What are the newer drugs for epilepsy?

Some antiepileptic drugs, such as sodium valproate and carbamazepine, have been used to treat epilepsy for many years. But between 1989 and 2000, seven new drugs came on to the market in the UK. These newer drugs are called gabapentin, lamotrigine, levetiracetam, oxcarbazepine, tiagabine, topiramate and vigabatrin. NICE has looked at these drugs and recommended how and when they should be used to treat adults with epilepsy. NICE is also producing guidance on how these drugs should be used in children (see page 10 for details).

## What has NICE recommended on newer drugs for epilepsy in adults?

During the appraisal, NICE's Appraisal Committee read and heard evidence from:

- clinical studies of the new antiepileptic drugs
- doctors with specialist knowledge of epilepsy and its treatment
- individuals with specialist knowledge of the issues affecting people with epilepsy

- organisations representing the views of people who will be affected by the guidance (either because they have, or care for someone with, epilepsy, or because they work in the NHS and are involved in providing care for people with the condition)
- the manufacturers of the newer antiepileptic drugs.

The evidence is summarised in the full guidance (see page 10 for details). More information about the studies is provided in the Assessment Report for this appraisal (see page 10 for details).

NICE has made the following recommendations about the use of newer drugs to treat adults with epilepsy in the NHS in England and Wales.

If the older drugs (such as sodium valproate and carbamazepine) do not stop a person from having seizures, or if the person experiences side effects, one of the newer drugs can be tried, as long as it is suitable for the type of epilepsy the person has. Lamotrigine, oxcarbazepine and topiramate can be given as the person's only treatment for epilepsy. They can also be given with another drug when that drug on its own does not stop a person's seizures (this is called combination therapy). Gabapentin, levetiracetam, tiagabine and vigabatrin are generally used as combination therapy with another drug.

A newer drug can also be tried if the older drugs are unsuitable for the person. This could be because there is a reason why he or she cannot take the older drugs (for example, some drugs are not suitable for people with liver disease), or because they cause unwanted effects that the person cannot tolerate. The older drugs might also be unsuitable if they affect another drug the person is taking (for example, some antiepileptic drugs make the contraceptive Pill work less well). Some antiepileptic drugs are unsuitable for women with epilepsy who might become pregnant because they might harm an unborn child.

NICE recommends that people should be treated with just one antiepileptic drug where possible. If the first drug doesn't stop a person having seizures, another can be tried. The person's doctor will need to take special care when changing over from one drug to another.

If the person has tried several drugs and none of them stops the seizures on its own, another drug can be added. This is called adjunctive or combination therapy. If the first combination does not work, other combinations can be tried. If none of them completely stops the seizures, the person should take the single drug or combination that works best for him or her. The decision on what drug or drugs a person takes will depend on the drugs' unwanted effects as well as how good they are at preventing his or her seizures.

Particular care is needed when deciding what drug to use for women who are pregnant or might get pregnant. When women take antiepileptic drugs during pregnancy, this can sometimes harm the baby. Many women with epilepsy need to continue taking antiepileptic drugs during pregnancy and it might be appropriate to make adjustments to a woman's drug treatment before she becomes pregnant. Women with epilepsy who are considering starting a family should discuss this with their epilepsy specialists. There is not yet enough information to say what precise effects the newer drugs have on an unborn child. The choice of antiepileptic drug may also affect a woman's choice of contraceptive, so this needs to be discussed as well.

A person who has a seizure for the first time should see an epilepsy specialist as soon as possible, to find out exactly what type of epilepsy he or she has, so that the best treatment can be started.

People with epilepsy should see a doctor regularly to make sure they are taking the drug or combination of drugs that works best for them, and that they are taking it correctly.

NICE's recommendations apply to all adults with epilepsy, including elderly people and people with learning disabilities.

## What should I do next?

If you or someone you care for has epilepsy, you should discuss this guidance with your epilepsy specialist.

## Will NICE review its guidance?

Yes. The guidance will be reviewed in December 2006.

## Further information

The NICE website ([www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)) has further information about NICE and the full guidance on newer drugs for epilepsy in adults that has been issued to the NHS. The assessment report, which contains details of the studies that were looked at, is also available from the NICE website. A short version of the guidance (a 'quick reference guide') is available on the website and from the NHS Response Line by phoning 0870 1555 455 and quoting reference N0453.

Later in 2004, NICE will produce guidance on using the newer anti-epileptic drugs in children.

If you have access to the Internet, you can find more information about epilepsy on the NHS Direct website ([www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)). You can also phone NHS Direct on 0845 4647.





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