

Review Article

Illicit Use of Gabapentin May Reveal More About the Drug's Benefits Than Its Liabilities

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Abstract: The anticonvulsant gabapentin is now one of the most commonly prescribed drugs in America. However, after nearly three decades of steady growth in popularity, the drug is becoming as controversial as it is popular. Although gabapentin was initially approved for the adjunctive treatment of partial seizures, its use has gradually expanded to an ever-increasingly number of disorders, including neuropathic pain, restless leg syndrome, generalized anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, treatment-resistant depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic insomnia, various substance use disorders, chronic insomnia, diabetic neuropathy, postoperative analgesia, tension headache, migraine headache, fibromyalgia, irritable bowel syndrome, hot flashes, essential tremor, nausea and vomiting, interstitial cystitis, overactive bladder, pruritus, chronic cough, and persistent hiccups. However, in addition to its prescription use, gabapentin is now becoming increasingly popular among illicit users, a phenomenon that appears to be the primary basis of the growing controversy around the drug. This article will explore both the benefits and liabilities of gabapentin in an effort to dispel the myths and clarify the facts about the drug. It will also compare the benefits of gabapentin to other anticonvulsants, analgesics, and psychotropic drugs in an effort to arrive at a more accurate risk-benefit assessment of gabapentin's use. With an ever-increasing amount of information being uploaded to the internet, it is especially important for those who have the most experience prescribing and researching gabapentin to tease out the misinformation and provide the medical community and the public with the most accurate possible understanding of the drug. Only then will we be able to take the greatest advantage and avoid the most harm in relation to this inexpensive and widely-prescribed pharmacological resource. Those interested in addition evidence-based information on gabapentin are directed to the article, Gabapentin: The Popular but Controversial Anticonvulsant Drug May Be Zeroing in on the Pathophysiology of Disease.

Keywords: Gabapentin, Neurontin®, Anxiety, Mood Swings, Chronic Pain, Drug Withdrawal, Neuronal Hyperexcitability, Mood Stabilizers

1. Introduction

After nearly 3 decades on the market as a safe, well-tolerated, and highly versatile anticonvulsant drug, gabapentin's safety and tolerability have, in recent years, been called into question. Some critics have raised concerns that the drug could be highly addictive; others fear that it could have serious respiratory depressant effects; and still others claim that it could be impairing brain function by preventing the formation of new connections between neurons. However,

these concerns are inconsistent with gabapentin's long history of uneventful use; hence, they raise the question of whether the factors driving them could be related more to gabapentin's growing popularity among illicit users than any new facts about the safety of the drug itself.

In an effort to provide an unbiased assessment of gabapentin, this review will discuss the potential risks and benefits of the drug in conjunction with its proposed mechanism of action in treating the growing number of disorders for which it is currently being used. It will also discuss the potential role of gabapentin in helping to prevent