

## **GUIDE FOR HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS**

This Guide is provided as part of the risk minimisation measures developed for valproate to inform valproate prescribers of the risks associated with the use of valproate by women of childbearing potential and during pregnancy.

The Guide will provide up-to-date information about the risk of neurodevelopmental disorders in children of women who have taken valproate during pregnancy in addition to the known risk of congenital malformations in exposed babies.

This guide should be used with the Patient information booklet.

## **WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE RISKS OF VALPROIC ACID USE IN FEMALE PATIENTS**

VALPROATE contains valproic acid, an active ingredient with known teratogenic effects which may result in congenital malformations. Available data also show that in utero exposure to valproate can be associated with an increased risk of developmental disorders. These risks are briefly described below.

### **1. CONGENITAL MALFORMATIONS**

Data derived from a meta-analysis (including registries and cohort studies) has shown that 10.73% of children of epileptic women exposed to valproate monotherapy during pregnancy suffer from congenital malformations (95% CI: 8.16 -13.29), which represents a greater risk of major malformations than for the general population, for whom the risk is equal to about 2-3%<sup>1</sup>. Available data show the risk is dose-dependent. The risk is greatest at higher doses (above 1 g daily). A threshold dose below which no risk exists cannot be established based on available data.

The most common types of malformations include neural tube defects, facial dysmorphism, cleft lip and palate, craniostenosis, cardiac, renal and urogenital defects, limb defects (including bilateral aplasia of the radius), and multiple anomalies involving various body systems.

### **2. DEVELOPMENTAL DISORDERS**

Exposure to valproate in utero can have adverse effects on mental and physical development of the exposed children. The risk seems to be dose-dependent but a threshold dose below which no risk exists, cannot be established based on available data. The exact gestational period of risk for these effects is uncertain and the possibility of a risk throughout the entire pregnancy cannot be excluded.

Studies<sup>2-5</sup> in preschool children exposed in utero to valproate show that up to 30-40% experience delays in their early development such as talking and walking later, lower intellectual abilities, poor language skills (speaking and understanding) and memory problems.

Intelligence quotient (IQ) measured in school aged children (age 6) with a history of valproate exposure in utero was on average 7-10 points lower than those children exposed to other antiepileptics<sup>9</sup>. Although the role of confounding cannot be excluded, there is evidence in children exposed to valproate that the risk of intellectual impairment may be independent from maternal IQ.

There are limited data on the long term outcomes.

Available data show that children exposed to valproate in utero are at increased risk of autistic spectrum disorder (approximately three-fold) and childhood autism (approximately five-fold) compared with the general study population<sup>7</sup>.

Limited data suggests that children exposed to valproate in utero may be more likely to develop symptoms of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)<sup>8</sup>.

## Treatment of female Patients with valproate

### A. FEMALE CHILD FIRST PRESCRIPTION

After medical evaluation, you are considering prescribing valproate to your patient:

- Confirm that treatment with valproate is appropriate for your patient (i.e. all other treatments have been tried and failed).
- Discuss the following topics with your patient and relevant family members/ care-givers:
  - Risks to pregnancy that are associated with the underlying condition;
  - Risks related to treatment, including risks related to valproate in case of pregnancy;
  - Need for an effective contraception method to avoid unplanned pregnancy.
  - Need for regular review of treatment
- Assess the most appropriate timing to provide advice on effective contraception methods and refer your patient to a specialist if needed.
- Ensure that your patient/ family members/ caregivers of the patient have understood the potential consequences in case of pregnancy and has/ have an adequate level of understanding of the risks.
- Two documents have been developed:
  - A Patient information booklet and Patient Card (Annex 1) which summarise the teratogenic safety information and highlight key points for treatment management:
    - Read it, as it may help you to deliver appropriate information to your patient
    - Give one copy to your patient
- Advise your patient to contact you immediately:
  - If she becomes pregnant or thinks she might be pregnant.
- Plan to review the need for treatment when she becomes capable of pregnancy.

### B. WOMEN OF CHILDBEARING AGE WHO ARE NOT PLANNING PREGNANCY

After medical evaluation, you are considering prescribing valproate to your patient:

- Confirm that treatment with valproate is appropriate for your patient (i.e. all other treatments have been tried and failed).
- Discuss the following topics with your patient:
  - Risks to pregnancy that are associated with the underlying condition;
  - Risks related to treatment, including risks related to valproate in case of pregnancy;
  - Need for an effective contraception method to avoid unplanned pregnancy;
  - Need for regular review of treatment.
- Assess the relevance of preconception counseling.

- Ensure that your patient has understood the potential risks to the child of using valproate during pregnancy and has an adequate level of understanding of the risks, and that she agrees to comply with the conditions for pregnancy.

For this, the following documents have been developed to support you:

- A Patient information booklet and Patient Card (Annex 1) which summarise the teratogenic safety information and highlight key points for treatment management
  - Give one copy to your patient
- Advise your patient to contact you:
  - If she becomes pregnant or thinks she might be pregnant;
  - in case of any adverse events associated with her treatment.

### **C. WOMAN OF CHILDBEARING AGE WHO IS PLANNING PREGNANCY**

- Remind your patients of teratogenic risks and risks of developmental disorders that can be seriously debilitating when taking valproate but also the risks of untreated seizures or bipolar disorder.
- Reassess the benefit/risk of valproate therapy, whatever the indication:
  - Consider if stopping treatment or switching to an alternative is possible.
  - If further to a careful evaluation of the risks and benefits, valproate treatment is to be continued, it is recommended to divide the daily dose into several small doses to be taken throughout the day at the lowest effective dosage possible. The use of a prolonged-release formulation may be preferable to other treatment forms.
  - Both valproate monotherapy and valproate polytherapy are associated with congenital malformations. Available data suggest that antiepileptic polytherapy including valproate is associated with a greater risk of abnormal pregnancy outcome than valproate monotherapy.
  - Folic acid supplementation may decrease the general risk of neural tube defects but the evidence does not suggest that it reduces the risk of birth defects associated with in utero valproate exposure.
- Consider referring your patient to specialists for preconception advice.
- Ensure that your patient has understood the potential risks to the pregnancy, and has an adequate level of understanding of the risks
  - A Patient information booklet and Patient Card (Annex 1) which summarise the risks should be given to the patient.
- Advise your patient to contact their family doctor as soon as she becomes pregnant or thinks she might be pregnant in order to initiate appropriate pregnancy monitoring, including prenatal monitoring to detect the possible occurrence of neural tube defects or other malformations.

## **D. WOMAN WITH UNPLANNED PREGNANCY**

- Schedule an urgent consultation with your patient to review treatment as soon as possible to reconsider the benefits and risks of valproate.
- Tell her to keep taking her treatment until you have seen her, unless you are able to give other advice based on your assessment of the situation.
  - If further to a careful evaluation of the risks and benefits, valproate treatment is to be continued, it is recommended to divide the daily dose into several small doses to be taken throughout the day at the lowest effective dosage possible. The use of a prolonged-release formulation may be preferable to other treatment forms.
  - Both valproate monotherapy and valproate polytherapy are associated with congenital malformations. Available data suggest that antiepileptic polytherapy including valproate is associated with a greater risk of abnormal pregnancy outcome than valproate monotherapy.
  - Folic acid supplementation may decrease the general risk of neural tube defects but the evidence does not suggest that it reduces the risk of birth defects associated with in utero valproate exposure.
  - Ensure that your patient:
    - has truly understood the risks related to valproate in case of pregnancy
    - has received the Patient information booklet and Patient Card (Annex 1)
- Initiate specialised prenatal monitoring in order to detect the possible occurrence of neural tube defects or other malformations.

## **Summary**

### **A. FEMALE CHILD FIRST PRESCRIPTION**

- 1. Explain potential risks of the disease itself for the unborn child and the risks associated with use of sodium valproate in pregnancy.**
- 2. Assess your patient's need for treatment with sodium valproate.**
- 3. Inform your patient about the need to use effective contraception as soon as it is relevant.**
- 4. Ensure that your patient has received the Patient information booklet.**
- 5. Where applicable, advise your patient to contact you immediately if she becomes pregnant or thinks she might be pregnant.**

### **B. WOMEN OF CHILDBEARING AGE WHO ARE NOT PLANNING PREGNANCY**

- 1. Explain potential risks of treatment and of untreated disease for the unborn child.**
- 2. Assess your patient's need for treatment with valproate.**
- 3. Inform your patient about the need to use effective contraception.**
- 4. Ensure that your patient has received the Patient information booklet.**
- 5. Advise your patient to contact you immediately if she becomes pregnant or thinks she might be pregnant.**

### **C. WOMAN OF CHILDBEARING AGE WHO IS PLANNING PREGNANCY**

- 1. Explain potential risks of the disease itself on the unborn child, independent from valproate's own risks.**
- 2. Re-assess benefit/risk of patient's therapy.**
- 3. Adapt current treatment.**
- 4. Advise your patient to contact you when she becomes pregnant or thinks she might be pregnant.**
- 5. Ensure that your patient has received the Patient information booklet.**

### **D. WOMAN WITH UNPLANNED PREGNANCY**

- 1. Inform her to keep taking her treatment until you have seen her.**
- 2. Schedule an urgent consultation.**
- 3. Re-assess the benefit/risk of her therapy.**
- 4. Ensure that your patient has understood the risks related to valproate in case of pregnancy.**

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## **References**

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