

**Here are this week's health care news highlights from AskaPatient:**

- Probiotics can evolve once inside the body and become less effective or even harmful. <http://ow.ly/NCIv30ogyIR> (04-01-19)
- Scientists identify a new class of small molecules that selectively kills brain cancer cells. <http://ow.ly/HEe130ogyq5> (04-01-19)
- One billion people may be newly exposed to disease-carrying mosquitoes as global temperatures rise. <http://ow.ly/Wc1I30ogyu1> (04-01-19)
- International study identifies groups of intestinal microorganisms that can be used to estimate risk of colorectal cancer. <http://ow.ly/TGw630ohJcb> (04-02-19)
- Compression only CPR outside the hospital can double survival rates during cardiac arrest. <http://ow.ly/lyW830ohJh1> (04-02-19)
- Women dominate the Ob/Gyn field, but are paid significantly less money than their male counterparts. <http://ow.ly/xmuC30ohJtz> (04-02-19)
- Scientists engineer therapeutic antibodies to treat gastrointestinal disorders that can be eaten instead of injected. <http://ow.ly/fVlu30ohJMd> (04-03-19)
- Mayo Clinic identifies 3 factors that can greatly prolong life expectancy for those with pancreatic cancer. <http://ow.ly/wHvF30oiNiE> (04-03-19)
- Compounds derived from hops may prove to be an important finding for treating liver and colon cancers. <http://ow.ly/ZzU030oiNj6> (04-03-19)
- Researchers learn that tendon cells change shape in low oxygen environments, which leads to chronic tendon issues. <http://ow.ly/4hm930oiNjw> (04-04-19)
- Liverpool survey reveals that many people blatantly dehumanize those with obesity, describing them as 'less evolved.' <http://ow.ly/vTKB30ojK0C> (04-04-19)
- UVA scientists discover the peripheral nervous system has the ability to repair itself under the right circumstances. <http://ow.ly/pRuh30ojK4r> (04-04-19)
- Exposure to white light at night, such as in the hospital, increases inflammation and brain cell death in cardiac patients. <http://ow.ly/3PKD30ojK7s> (04-05-19)
- Vitamin B12 found to play a protective role against hereditary Parkinson's, inhibiting a key enzyme in the disease process. <http://ow.ly/16lv30okB3k> (04-05-19)
- Brain damage from chronic alcohol use persists for at least 6 weeks after sobriety, and may never fully heal. <http://ow.ly/SV4e30okB7j> (04-05-19)
- Think again before reaching for a sugary snack to get you through the afternoon; it will only make things worse, study says. <http://ow.ly/MWIK30okBd7> (04-06-19)
- Study shuts door for potential Alzheimer's prevention, finding anti-inflammatory drugs have no preventative effects. <http://ow.ly/96gs30olCIX> (04-06-19)
- Genetic components of sleep identified, closely linked to genetic regions for serotonin production. <http://ow.ly/1u4D30olCnl> (04-06-

### ***From AskaPatient: Why are so many patients being prescribed gabapentin ?***

In 2017, the anticonvulsant/nerve pain drug **gabapentin** was the eighth most-prescribed generic drug in the U.S., with **68 million prescriptions** dispensed. Of those, **29 million prescriptions** were for patients over 65 years old (Medicare Part D patients). In 2011, only **14 million prescriptions** for gabapentin were filled for Medicare Part D patients. That is a doubling of gabapentin prescriptions filled by seniors in only six years.

Gabapentin (brand name Neurontin by Pfizer) is FDA-approved to treat two conditions: **an adjunct therapy for partial onset seizures associated with epilepsy** and **nerve pain after shingles**. Given that an increasing number of people over the age of 50 are receiving shingles vaccines, and that a sudden increase in seniors with epilepsy isn't likely, there must be other factors at play to account for the surge in the drug's use. Some attribute the increase in gabapentin use to the **opioid addiction crisis**, for these two reasons:

**1. A reluctance of doctors to prescribe opioids** like OxyContin, Percocet, or generics like oxycodone and oxycodone/acetaminophen combinations for pain. Gabapentin can serve as a substitute for the strong opioid pain killers for some kinds of pain, and some patients are receiving off-label prescriptions of gabapentin for different kinds of pain.

However, for seniors under Medicare Part D, this doesn't seem to be a contributing reason for the spike in gabapentin Rx's, because the number of prescriptions written for generic opioids also increased for this age group between 2011 and 2017. For example, there were **6.7 million prescriptions for oxycodone/acetaminophen** in 2011, while in 2017 the number jumped to **10 million prescriptions** written for that generic. In fact, a report from the AHRQ says opioid use by seniors is a growing problem.

Click here to read patient experiences of

[gabapentin for pain](#)

[Neurontin for pain](#) (including surgery-related, migraine headache, nerve pain)

**2. An increase in demand for gabapentin by those who are suffering from drug withdrawal**, because the drug helps lessen their withdrawal symptoms. The problem with this new off-label use is that gabapentin has become a drug of abuse, even though it is not on the federal controlled substance list. It can intensify the effects of other drugs or alcohol to a dangerous level, and is often taken at three times the recommended dose. Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia have added gabapentin to their states' controlled substance schedules. Read patient experiences of using gabapentin [to treat withdrawal to drugs or alcohol](#) symptoms.

It could simply be that for seniors, the spike in prescriptions for gabapentin has more to do with increased awareness of off-label uses, and the fact that they are being prescribed more drugs overall. **Another common off-label use of gabapentin is for fibromyalgia**. Pfizer's newer drug Lyrica (pregabalin), which was scheduled to go off-patent in 2018, has FDA approval to treat fibromyalgia although it only has a satisfaction score of 2.8 (a bit less than somewhat satisfied) on AskaPatient. Click to read patients' experiences with [Lyrica for fibromyalgia](#). For each of the additional uses below, average patient rating was a 3 (somewhat satisfied) or more.

[Anxiety](#) (gabapentin)

[Anxiety](#) (Neurontin)

[Bipolar](#) (gabapentin)

[Bipolar](#) (Neurontin)

#### **Fast Facts about Gabapentin:**

**Year approved** by FDA: 1993

**Brand name** version: Neurontin (Pfizer Pharmaceutical)

**Number of generic manufacturers:** 30 as of December 2017

**Average rating score:** 2.9 (somewhat satisfied)

**Approved patient ages:** approved for patients age 3 and up with epilepsy; approved for adult patients for treatment of nerve pain after shingles.

Average age of patient reviewing gabapentin on AskaPatient.com: 56

**Top reasons** patients reported taking it: fibromyalgia, restless legs syndrome, neuralgia, Parkinson's disease, anxiety, general pain, bipolar, and back pain.

**Top side effects** reported on AskaPatient: drowsiness, weight gain, dizziness, amnesia, insomnia, nausea.

**Interesting off-label use:** In the [medical literature](#), there is anecdotal evidence of effectiveness of gabapentin for curing hiccups.

**Sources and more reading:**

- Center for Medicare Services: *Medicare Part D Drug Spending and Utilization, Calendar Years 2013 – 2017 and Calendar Years 2011 – 2015* [CMS Dashboard](#)

- HDA Research Foundation 2018-2019 Fact Book [HDA.org](#)

- "Gabapentin abuse spikes in Kentucky and is often found in overdose deaths." [Bowling Green Daily News article](#) explains why Kentucky added gabapentin (Neurontin) to its Schedule V drug list. February 17, 2018.

- "Perspective: FDA and the next wave of drug abuse: proactive pharmacovigilance." Commentary on FDA's social media monitoring to find out about patient use of gabapentinoids as well as botanicals like Kratom.

[New England Journal of Medicine](#) July 19, 2018.

- "New AHRQ Reports Highlight Seniors' Struggles with Opioids" September 18, 2018 [report](#), Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

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