



UPSTATE VETERINARY SPECIALTIES PLLC

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## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ...PHENOBARBITAL



Phenobarbital is perhaps the most widely used anticonvulsant in veterinary medicine. It is effective, safe if used responsibly, reasonably priced, and conveniently dosed - all of which make it a popular choice. In general, phenobarbital is considered a safe drug when drug levels and bloodwork (complete blood count and biochemistry) are performed regularly.

- Blood therapeutic drug levels are indicated:
- 2-3 weeks after starting therapy
- When there is a dosage change
- Every 6 - 12 months to confirm blood concentration levels have not drifted out of the therapeutic range
- When undesirable drug-related side effects are suspected

Phenobarbital works by decreasing and stabilizing neuronal activity in the brain. It enhances GABA, which is an inhibitory neurotransmitter, thereby decreasing over-excited neurons. In addition to decreasing seizure activity, it can also lead to some side effects, such as lethargy and sedation. Short-term side effects typically improve after a few weeks. Bloodwork monitoring is required periodically long-term, as phenobarbital is usually a life-long medication.



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## COMMON POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF PHENOBARBITAL



***Sedation:*** While Phenobarbital does cause sedation and weakness initially, this is usually temporary and subsides within the first few weeks as the patient becomes adjusted to the medication. Sedation can be seen again if the dose is increased or if the dose is too high.

***Excessive Appetite:*** Phenobarbital can make patients very hungry. This can be problematic if the patient becomes obese or overly focused on food.

***Excessive Thirst:*** Increased thirst is usually most pronounced in the initial first few weeks of therapy, but it also could be a concern if the patient drinks so much water that it has accidents in the house. Patients may need to be taken outside for bathroom breaks more often than usual for the first few weeks of therapy.

## UNCOMMON POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF PHENOBARBITAL

Chronic phenobarbital use can lead to scarring in the liver and liver failure that can be irreversible. In most situations, serious liver damage can be avoided by keeping drug levels in the therapeutic range and close monitoring. Liver toxicity is seen rarely in cats compared to dogs. Cats can get itchy faces on phenobarbital which could become problematic enough to require a medication change. Rarely, anemia and bone marrow suppression can occur with phenobarbital use. Should this occur, a different seizure medication should be used.

It is important to give phenobarbital to your pet for the full duration of the prescription and not miss a dose, as this can result in seizures. Phenobarbital should never be abruptly discontinued as this can lead to seizures. Always consult your veterinarian before adjusting medication dosages.