

Guanfacine and Clonidine

Guanfacine (Intuniv) and Clonidine (Catapres, Kapvay) are non-stimulant medication that treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). They also treat:

- High blood pressure
- Anxiety and insomnia
- Nightmares
- Bipolar mania
- Tourette's syndrome (tics)
- Irritability and oppositional defiant disorder
- Self-harm
- Autism
- Cognition in schizophrenia
- Heroin and opioid withdrawal
- Itch, sweating, drooling, menopausal flushing, irritable bowel syndrome, tension headaches, migraines, high blood pressure.

Unlike the stimulants, they do not work right away. Their benefits build up gradually over 2-4 weeks.

The two medications work through the same mechanisms, and some do better on one or the other. Guanfacine is less sedating, and clonidine is better for many of the problems in the bulleted list above.

How they work

They improve norepinephrine signaling in the prefrontal cortex. That is the part of the brain that helps us manage complex tasks. It regulates memory, attention, impulse control, prioritizing, and planning.

How should I take it?

Take before bed as they can be sedating. Both are available as instant and extended-release. Clonidine is also available as a weekly patch that can be better tolerated than the oral forms.

If using the extended-release, do not crush, chew, or break them. After taking it, the blood levels peak approximately 2-3 hours later (for instant release) or 6 hours later (for extended release).

What if I forget a dose?

Take the missed dose as soon as you remember it. However, if it is almost time for the next dose, skip the missed dose and continue your regular dosing schedule. Do not take a double dose to make up for a missed one.

How long do I need to take it?

These medications are not addictive. How long you need to take them depends on what it is treating.

What happens if I stop it?

Abrupt discontinuation can result in nervousness, anxiety, and rarely rebound hypertension. To minimize these effects, lower the dose gradually by 1 mg every 3-7 days.

Side effects

Tiredness, dizziness, dry mouth, constipation, abdominal pain, fatigue, headache, weakness, and low blood pressure. Weight gain is very rare.

Dangerous side effects include low heart rate and low blood pressure (dose-related).

Pregnancy: They have not been adequately evaluated during pregnancy and breast feeding.

Overdose

Slow heart rate, drowsiness, low blood pressure, and sluggishness have been observed

following overdose. No fatal overdoses of have been reported.

Interactions

Guanfacine levels may be raised by valproate (Depakote), nefazodone, fluoxetine, fluvoxamine, and ketoconazole. Both medications can cause low blood pressure and falls when combined with other blood pressure medications.

The web sites below help you check for drug interactions:

reference.medscape.com/drug-interactionchecker

How to store and dispose of medication

- Keep out of the reach of children.
- Store away from heat, direct light and damp places.
- To safely dispose of unwanted pills: Do not pour in the toilet or sink (it will enter the water supply). To prevent children or pets from eating it, mix unwanted pills in a bag with a little water and inedible trash (such as coffee grounds or kitty litter) and throw in the trash.

Cost and insurance coverage

Both are available generic. If you are paying out-of-pocket, you'll find the lowest price at www.goodrx.com.

—Chris Aiken, MD, updated 6/23/2025

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Brands	Guanfacine (Intuniv) Clonidine (Kapvay)
Dose range	Guafacine ER: 1-4 mg/day Guafacine instant release: 1-2 mg/day Clonidine ER: 0.1-0.4 mg/day Clonidine instant release: 0.1-0.6 mg/day
FDA-approval	ADHD, Hypertension