

# Vasoactive Intestinal Peptide (VIP): Essential Functions and Health Conditions

*By Kelley S. Mulhern, MS, DC, MPH, CFMP®*

Vasoactive Intestinal Peptide (VIP) is a neuropeptide that plays a significant role in various biological processes in your body. As a member of the glucagon/secretin superfamily, VIP functions as a neuromodulator and neurotransmitter. As you explore the topic, you'll discover how VIP influences smooth muscle activity, epithelial cell secretion, and blood flow within the gastrointestinal tract.

The primary function of VIP in your body involves vasodilation, which means it helps expand blood vessels to maintain proper blood flow. Not only does this peptide aid in overall digestion processes, but it also has an impact on regulating the secretion of certain hormones. Understanding the role of VIP, its mechanisms, and its potential implications in various medical conditions can help you deepen your comprehension of this essential peptide hormone.

## Physiological Functions

### Role in Gastrointestinal System

Vasoactive Intestinal Peptide (VIP) plays a crucial role in the gastrointestinal system by regulating ion secretion, nutrient absorption, and gut motility. Produced in tissues such as the gut and pancreas, this peptide hormone impacts various neuronal, epithelial, and endocrine cell functions to maintain homeostasis in your body.

For example, VIP helps in the secretion of electrolytes into the gastrointestinal tract, ensuring the proper absorption of nutrients from your food while also regulating smooth muscle activity for optimal gut motility and digestion [source](#).

## Effect on Cardiovascular System

In the cardiovascular system, VIP primarily functions as a potent vasodilator. It accomplishes this by targeting blood vessels and causing them to relax and widen, resulting in increased blood flow. This vasodilation action leads to a decrease in blood pressure and promotes overall cardiovascular health [source](#).

## Involvement in Nervous System

VIP plays a significant role in the nervous system as a neuropeptide that functions as a neuromodulator and neurotransmitter [source](#). It is produced in the hypothalamus within the suprachiasmatic nuclei in your brain, as well as in peripheral nervous system nerve endings. These VIP immunoreactive nerve fibers have been linked to various functions, such as regulating circadian rhythms and influencing embryonic development [source](#).

## Impact on Immune System

The immune system also benefits from VIP's multifaceted activities. As a neuropeptide synthesized and released by immune cells and nerve endings that synapse on central and peripheral lymphoid organs, VIP aids in regulating mast cell activation, immune responses, and inflammation management [source](#).

For instance, VIP plays a role in alleviating inflammation and symptoms in diseases like colitis by interacting with certain receptors and raising cAMP levels in your body. This interaction helps modulate inflammatory responses, demonstrating VIP's importance in maintaining your immune system's balance and health.

## Health Conditions and VIP

Vasoactive Intestinal Peptide (VIP) is a neuropeptide that plays a significant role in your body by regulating smooth muscle activity, epithelial cell secretion, and blood flow in the gastrointestinal tract [1-3](#). It's essential to be

aware of the various health conditions associated with abnormal levels of VIP.

Elevated VIP levels, combined with symptoms such as **watery diarrhea** and **flushing**, could indicate a VIPoma [4](#). This rare kind of tumor secretes excessive amounts of VIP, leading to these symptoms.

VIP is also linked to **infections** and the immune system. When your body experiences an infection, the VIP levels may be affected [5](#). Further studies are needed to fully comprehend the role of VIP in infection-related processes.

People with inflammatory and autoimmune conditions, such as **asthma** and **arthritis**, may benefit from understanding that VIP has anti-inflammatory and immunomodulatory properties. These properties could potentially assist in the treatment of these conditions.

Moreover, VIP is found throughout your peripheral and central nervous system (CNS) [6](#), playing a role in various homeostatic functions. Abnormal VIP function has been associated with conditions like **hypokalemia (decreased blood potassium)**, **COPD**, **pulmonary arterial hypertension**, and **chronic inflammatory response syndrome**.

Recently, researchers have discovered a possible association between VIP levels and **COVID-19** severity. Altered VIP levels may impact the body's response to the virus and contribute to complications [7](#).

Lastly, VIP's significant role in regulating the gastrointestinal tract implies that it may have an impact on **gut health**. Maintaining an appropriate balance of VIP levels is vital to ensure the proper functioning of the digestive system.

## VIPoma and Endocrine Tumors

Endocrine tumors are part of a type of cancer that originates from cells producing and releasing hormones. These cells are commonly found in endocrine glands or the gastrointestinal tract. Neuroendocrine tumors, such as VIPomas, belong to a subclass of endocrine tumors that originate from the neuroendocrine system's specialized cells.

VIPoma syndrome is caused by the excessive and unregulated secretion of VIP by the tumor. Other substances like prostaglandin E2 can also occasionally be secreted by these tumors [source](#).

When a neuroendocrine neoplasm (malignant tumor) excessively secretes VIP, it is called a **VIPoma**. Typically, these tumors present with severe watery secretory diarrhea, potentially resulting in hypokalemia (decreased blood potassium) and metabolic acidosis and causing flushes in patients. VIPomas can also lead to hypochlorhydria ([low stomach acid](#) levels), stimulation of glycogenolysis (the breakdown of stored molecules into glucose), and hypercalcemia (elevated blood calcium) [source](#).

You should be aware that VIPomas are often associated with a genetic disorder known as multiple endocrine neoplasia 1 (MEN1). This disorder increases the risk of developing VIPomas and several other endocrine tumors, including those affecting the parathyroid and pituitary glands.

Lastly, it's important to consider the incidence of VIPomas. Although these tumors are relatively rare, they've been reported mainly in adults, with a higher occurrence in women. Early detection and management of VIPomas are crucial, as the complications arising from excessive VIP secretion can significantly impact a patient's quality of life [source](#).

## Blood Test and Diagnosis

### Test Preparation

To prepare for the Vasoactive Intestinal Peptide (VIP) blood test, you should not eat or drink anything for 4 hours before the test. This fasting period helps ensure accurate results and minimizes any potential complications during the testing process.

### Procedure and Risks

The VIP blood test requires a blood sample. During the blood draw, you may experience moderate pain, and a small risk of bruising at the puncture

site. It's also possible to feel lightheaded or faint, but these side effects are relatively rare.

Some risks associated with blood tests include excessive bleeding, multiple punctures to locate veins, and hematoma (blood buildup under the skin). Overall, these risks are low, and blood tests are generally safe procedures.

## Normal and Abnormal Results

Once your blood sample has been collected, it will be analyzed in a laboratory for the presence of VIP. Normal values for VIP in the blood should be less than 70 pg/mL (20.7 pmol/L) <sup>1</sup>. People with VIP-secreting tumors, such as VIPomas, usually have values 3 to 10 times above the normal range <sup>2</sup>.

Your healthcare provider may also order tests for serum potassium and other factors alongside the VIP blood test. This additional data helps in the laboratory diagnosis of pancreatic disorders and other conditions related to VIP levels.

In summary, the VIP blood test is a useful tool for diagnosing VIP-related health issues. With adequate preparation and understanding of the procedure, risks, and expected results, you can confidently undergo this test as part of your healthcare journey.

## Footnotes

1. [Mount Sinai Health System – Vasoactive intestinal peptide test](#) ↻
2. [Labcorp – 010397: Vasoactive Intestinal Polypeptide \(VIP\), Plasma](#) ↻

## VIP and Central Nervous System

Vasoactive Intestinal Peptide (VIP) is also found throughout the peripheral and central nervous system (CNS), including in the [cortex](#). It plays a variety

of roles in numerous biological functions such as vasodilation, glycogenolysis (breakdown of stored molecules into glucose), and regulation of arterial blood pressure. One key function of VIP is the relaxation of smooth muscles in organs like the trachea and lower esophageal sphincter.

VIP also modulates the secretory activities of various glands. For example, it stimulates the release of pancreatic juice, inhibits gastric acid secretion, and regulates pepsinogen and prolactin secretion.

An important aspect of VIP's function is its interaction with immune cells. VIP acts as an anti-inflammatory agent by inhibiting the release of proinflammatory mediators from immune cells. This makes it an attractive target for the development of [VIP antagonist](#) therapies aimed at reducing inflammation and related diseases.

Recent research has also suggested a potential link between VIP and social behavior, including its potential role in autism spectrum disorders. Although the exact mechanisms are not yet fully understood, the involvement of VIP in modulating neurotransmitter release and neuronal excitability suggests that it may contribute to the regulation of social interactions.

In summary, VIP is a versatile peptide hormone with numerous functions throughout the body, particularly within the central nervous system. Its effects on smooth muscle relaxation, secretion regulation, immune cell modulation, and potential involvement in social behavior highlight its importance in maintaining overall health and well-being.

## Conclusion

In your exploration of Vasoactive Intestinal Peptide (VIP), you've learned that it is a neuropeptide that plays a crucial role in regulating several physiological functions. Synthesized and released by immune cells and nerve endings, VIP has an impact on central and peripheral lymphoid organs <sup>1</sup>.

Given its strong regulatory activity on intestinal immunity, VIP is an essential component in understanding the pathogenesis and treatment of

certain diseases such as ulcerative colitis <sup>2</sup>. Moreover, vasoactive peptides, including VIP, have been implicated in the pathogenesis and potential treatment of COVID-19, leading some researchers to propose routine monitoring of these peptides in COVID-19 patients <sup>3</sup>.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### What is the role of VIP in digestion?

Vasoactive Intestinal Peptide (VIP) plays a crucial role in regulating digestive processes. It helps maintain [intestinal wall integrity](#) by reinforcing the epithelial cells making up the wall. VIP also [stimulates gastrointestinal water and electrolyte secretion](#) and regulates smooth muscle activity and blood flow in your gastrointestinal tract.

### How does VIP function as a hormone?

As a hormone, VIP acts on various target tissues, exerting wide-ranging effects, such as relaxing smooth muscle and stimulating gastrointestinal secretion. It also has potent [vasodilatory properties](#) and can regulate blood flow throughout your body.

### What are common symptoms associated with high VIP levels?

High VIP levels are typically linked to VIP-secreting tumors called VIPomas. Individuals with these tumors may have symptoms like diarrhea, abdominal pain, dehydration, and electrolyte imbalances. It's worth noting that normal VIP values should be [less than 70 pg/mL](#), while those with VIP-secreting tumors usually have values 3 to 10 times above the normal range.

### What factors can cause an increase in VIP levels?

The primary factor that can cause an increase in VIP levels is the presence of VIP-secreting tumors (VIPomas). These tumors usually originate in the

pancreas or other parts of the gastrointestinal tract and can cause elevated VIP levels in your blood.

## What is the mechanism of action for VIP?

VIP primarily acts as a neuromodulator and neurotransmitter, binding to specific receptors on target cells and triggering a series of intracellular events. This leads to effects such as smooth muscle relaxation, vasodilation, and regulation of blood flow and secretion in your gastrointestinal tract.

## How is VIP administered as a treatment?

While VIP is not commonly used as a standalone treatment, it can potentially be administered as a peptide therapy for various health conditions. The method of administration may vary depending on the condition being treated and the objectives of the therapy. It is essential to consult with a qualified healthcare professional before considering any form of VIP treatment.

## Footnotes

1. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/neuroscience/vasoactive-intestinal-peptide>
2. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7789055/>
3. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8179120/>