

Which Mood Stabiliser is Right for Me?

Patient Information - Hillmorton Hospital Pharmacy

What is a mood stabiliser and when are they used?

Mood stabilisers are medicines used to treat and prevent mania and depressive episodes in bipolar disorder.

In bipolar disorder, mood stabilisers help to prevent your mood from becoming too high or too low. They make your mood feel more consistent.



What different mood stabilisers are available?

Lithium was the first mood stabiliser used in bipolar disorder. It has been used since 1949 and there is a large amount of data that shows lithium is very useful in the treatment of bipolar disorder. It is also been shown to reduce episodes of self-harm and suicide.

A number of anti-epileptic medications are also used as mood stabilisers. These are sodium valproate, carbamazepine and lamotrigine.

Can other medications be used as mood stabilisers?

Some antipsychotics such as olanzapine, aripiprazole, risperidone, haloperidol and quetiapine are also used as mood stabilisers.

They are often used in the treatment of mania and hypomania. It is common to be on both an antipsychotic and a mood stabiliser if you are unwell. Many people need more than one mood stabiliser to stay well.

What about the side effects from mood stabilisers?

All medicines carry risks of side effects. Your doctor may wish to perform regular blood tests while you are taking mood stabilising medicines in order to check for any side-effects.

For more information on side-effects specific to individual mood stabilisers, please refer to their respective information leaflets.

Many of the mood stabilisers have interactions with other medicines, food and drink products. You should talk to your doctor or pharmacist before starting a new medication or supplement.

Which is the best mood stabiliser?

As everyone is individual, the best mood stabiliser will be different for different people. Please talk to your doctor about which one might be best for you.

How do mood stabilisers work?

Your mood is affected by chemicals in the brain that help to carry messages from one part to another. As a class of medicines, mood stabilisers work on chemical pathways in the brain to decrease activity in parts of the brain that are over-active.

How might your doctor decide which mood stabiliser to use?

The evidence suggests that if a particular mood stabiliser got you well initially, you may do best if you stay on that medicine rather than switch to another mood stabiliser.

Your doctor will consider many factors before prescribing you a mood stabiliser. These include:

- The medicines safety and side effect profile.
- Other medicines that you are taking.
- If you are planning to have children or of child bearing age.
- Other physical health issues you may have.
- What medicines you have tried before.

If I am depressed and have bipolar disorder, is there a medicine for me?

There are a number of mood stabilisers that have been shown to work specifically for depression in bipolar disorder. These include (in no particular order) quetiapine, lamotrigine and the combination of olanzapine and fluoxetine.

Are mood stabilisers safe for me?

It is usually safe to take mood stabilisers regularly as prescribed by your doctor, but they do not suit everyone. If you have the following medical conditions, or others you are concerned about, you should let your doctor know.

- If you are pregnant, breast-feeding, or planning to become pregnant.
- If you have kidney, heart or liver disease.
- Hypothyroidism.

What if I am not sure about starting a mood stabiliser?

If you are unsure about whether you are ready to fully commit to taking a mood stabiliser, it may be best to share this with your doctor as some mood stabilisers are less suitable in this situation.

When I feel better, can I stop taking my mood stabiliser?

No, without treatment bipolar mood episodes usually recur. Although mood stabilisers are not addictive, your body can get used to having the medicine on board. This means that if you stop the medicine, it is common for symptoms of bipolar disorder to return.

Mood stabilisers are intended to be used for long periods of time, including when you are feeling well. You should talk to your doctor before stopping your medicine and make a plan for how this is going to happen.

Are mood stabilisers addictive?

No. Mood stabilisers are not habit-forming or addictive. Most people need to take their mood stabilisers for a long time, often for years. Your doctor will monitor you and organise regular blood tests to help prevent any long-term side effects.

What about pregnancy and mood stabilisers?

Sodium valproate is not safe in pregnancy. It can potentially cause both physical defects and intellectual disability of the infant. It is advised that if you are a person of child-bearing age then sodium valproate can only be used if you are using very reliable contraception.

If you are planning to become pregnant or have become pregnant, you should seek medical advice from your doctor about which mood stabiliser you should be on. Do not stop taking your medicine unless you have been seen by your doctor and a plan has been discussed.

What about alcohol, marijuana and other recreational drugs?

It is recommended that people taking mood stabilisers do not drink alcohol, use marijuana or other recreational drugs. These substances can cause your mood to become unstable. They can also cause falls or accidents by making you feel clumsy and drowsy.

Where can I find further information?

Books, leaflets and the internet are good sources of information but internet-based information is not always accurate. If you would like more information you can talk to your doctor or pharmacist.

Some websites that you may find useful are:

www.healthinfo.org.nz

www.medsafe.govt.nz

www.mymedicines.co.nz

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