

Lithium (Lith-ee-um)

Patient Information - Hillmorton Hospital Pharmacy

Why have I been prescribed lithium?

Lithium is used to help treat and prevent mood swings which occur in bipolar affective disorder. People with bipolar affective disorder have mood swings that are much more severe than the small changes in mood that everyone experiences. With bipolar affective disorder, mood may be elevated or depressed (up or down).

When the mood is extremely elevated this is called hypomania or mania. People with hypomania feel very energetic and elated but can be irritable and frustrated. They may talk very quickly, sleep very little and be full of ideas and plans. They can be described as being “high”.

Treatment is usually needed because when people are “high” they may make poor decisions and can quickly become exhausted. Periods of depression will also occur in bipolar affective disorder. Symptoms include feelings of sadness, tiredness and poor sleep.

Lithium helps stabilise the mood and helps even out the highs and lows. Lithium is also prescribed together with certain antidepressants to increase their effect when someone is suffering from severe depression.



What exactly is lithium?

Lithium is a naturally occurring salt, closely related to sodium. Depending on where you live in the country, low concentrations of lithium can be found in the tap water. This is considered safe and normal.

No one exactly knows how lithium works. This is because the brain is a very complex organ of the body. What we do know is that lithium does interact with a variety of neurotransmitters and neurons (brain cells) to stabilise the mood.

(Neurotransmitters are the chemicals in our body which transmit messages from one region of the brain to another).

Why do I need to have some blood tests?

The first blood test is to check that it's safe for you to take lithium. Your kidneys need to be in good shape and your thyroid gland must be working properly.

Five to seven days after you start taking lithium, you will need another blood test. This will tell the doctor if you are taking the right dose of lithium.

Once your dose is established, you will only need a blood test once every three months. This blood test is called a lithium level. It is usually taken 12 hours after your last dose.

Lithium levels are important. If levels in the blood are too high you may experience side-effects (see the table on page 4) and if the levels are too low the lithium may not be effective.

Is lithium safe to take?

It is usually safe to have lithium regularly as prescribed by your doctor, but it doesn't suit everyone.

Let your doctor know if any of the following apply to you, as extra care may be needed:

- If you have any medical condition such as myasthenia gravis or thyroid disorder, suffer from heart or kidney trouble or are about to undergo surgery.
- If you are pregnant, breast feeding or wish to become pregnant.

How should I take my lithium?

Look at the label on your medicine. It should have all the necessary instructions on it. Follow this advice carefully. Usually lithium is taken once a day at night, but it can be taken more often during the day if your doctor wishes. Sometimes your doctor may not write whether you take capsules or slow release tablets on your prescription. Always make sure you tell your pharmacist the form of lithium you take. This is important. If you have any questions, speak to your doctor or pharmacist.

What should I do if I miss a dose?

Never change your dose without checking with your doctor. If you forget a dose, take it as soon as you remember, as long as it is within a few hours of the usual time.

What will happen when I start taking lithium?

For most people with bipolar affective disorder, highs and lows occur infrequently, so it may take months or years to appreciate the beneficial effects of lithium. Lithium should make these highs and lows less extreme or less frequent.

The best way to know whether lithium is working for you is to compare your highs and lows before and whilst taking it. Some people may get some side effects before they start to feel better. Most of these should go away after a few weeks.

Sometimes the amount of lithium in your body gets too high which can be dangerous. You need to be able to recognise the side effects that can mean a high level of lithium. Look at the table overleaf. It tells you what to do if you get any side effects.

Not everyone will get the side effects shown.

There are many other possible side effects. Ask your pharmacist, doctor or nurse if you are worried about anything else that you think might be a side effect.

Are there any medicines I should avoid or take care with?

Lithium can interact with other medicines, including some pain relief or arthritis medicines, some antidepressants, some heart and blood pressure medicines and some cough mixtures. Always check with your doctor or pharmacist before starting a new medicine or buying a medicine 'over the counter'. Ibuprofen should be avoided by those taking lithium.

When I feel better, can I stop taking lithium?

You should never stop taking lithium suddenly.

People who do suddenly stop taking lithium become mentally unwell much more quickly than those who come off it slowly. Lithium is usually a long-term treatment. It is not addictive. You and your doctor should decide together when it is time for you to come off it. This should be gradually over at least 4 weeks, if not longer.

What about alcohol?

It is recommended that people taking lithium should not drink alcohol. This is because both lithium and alcohol can cause drowsiness. If the two are taken at the same time, severe drowsiness can occur. This can lead to falls or accidents.

As well as this, drinking alcohol can often make your mood unstable. Excessive drinking is especially likely to do this. Once people are used to taking medication, they can sometimes drink alcohol in small amounts without any harm.

Avoid alcohol altogether for the first one or two months. After this, if you want a drink, try a glass of your normal drink and see how you feel. If this doesn't make you feel drowsy, then it is probably okay to drink small amounts. It pays to be very cautious because alcohol affects people in different ways, especially when they are taking medication.

Remember to drink some water as well as alcohol is dehydrating.

Don't stop taking your medication because you fancy a drink at the weekend. Discuss any concerns you may have with your doctor, pharmacist or nurse. If you do drink alcohol, drink only small amounts.

Never drink any alcohol and drive.

Do I need to know anything else?

Yes. The amount of salt in your diet can change the level of lithium in your body. Eat a balanced diet and don't change the amount of salt you usually have in your food. Don't binge on high salt snacks like crisps or salty crackers.

Some illnesses can change the amount of salt in our bodies. We lose salt in our sweat and when we have a fever or 'flu. We also lose salt if we are sick or have diarrhoea. All these conditions can change the level of lithium in our bodies. Do not ignore feelings of thirst – keep up your fluid intake. Remember to drink plenty of water when it is hot and when you are exercising. It is important to tell your doctor straight away if you are feeling unwell.

SIDE EFFECT	WHAT IS IT?	WHAT SHOULD I DO IF THIS HAPPENS TO ME?
COMMON		
Tremor	Fine shaking of the hands.	If it annoys you, your doctor can give you something for it. If it gets worse and spreads to the legs or jaw, stop taking your lithium and see your doctor.
Stomach upset	This includes feeling and being sick and getting diarrhoea.	Always take your lithium with food. If it lasts for more than a day, check for other signs of toxicity (on the next page). See your doctor immediately.
Polyuria	Passing a lot of urine.	Discuss this with your doctor. A dose reduction may help.
Polydipsia	Feeling very thirsty. Your mouth is dry and there may be a metallic taste.	Make sure you drink enough water. Avoid high calorie drinks. Chewing sugarless gum may help. Make sure you clean your teeth twice a day.
LESS COMMON		
Weight gain	Eating more and putting on weight.	Try and avoid putting on weight in the first place. Eat a healthy diet full of vegetables and fibre and do physical activities such as walking. Avoid fatty foods like chocolate and crisps and high sugar foods such as cakes, sweets and fizzy drinks. Ask to see a dietitian if you need help with food choices.
Oedema	When your ankles or feet swell up.	Discuss this with your doctor when you next see them.
Hypo-thyroidism	Low thyroid activity – feeling tired all the time.	Tell your doctor the next time you visit.
RARE		
Skin rashes	Blotches seen anywhere.	Stop taking your lithium and see your doctor.

Signs of toxic lithium levels:

Your lithium dose may be too high if you suffer any of the following:

- Blurred vision (things look fuzzy or you can't focus properly)
- Drowsiness or feeling sleepy or sluggish
- Confusion
- Slurred speech
- Increased thirst or passing more urine or water
- Dizziness and vomiting
- Unsteadiness on your feet
- Severe tremor or twitching
- Clumsiness

If this happens, stop taking lithium and contact your doctor now.

But remember, just stopping lithium because you don't want to take it can cause your bipolar illness to rebound.

Remember, leaflets like this can only describe some of the effects of medication. You may also find other books or leaflets useful. If you have access to the internet, you may find a lot of information there as well, but be careful as internet-based information is not always accurate.

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