



Patient and Caregiver Information on Lithium

Lithium is classified as a mood stabilizer. It is a simple element, found in nature, and is also present in small amounts in the human body.

What is this drug used for?

Lithium is used primarily to treat symptoms of acute mania and in the long term for control or prevention of bipolar depression and mania.

Though not approved for these indications, lithium has also been found to augment the effects of antidepressants in depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder, and is useful in the treatment of cluster headaches as well as chronic aggression or impulsivity. Ask your doctor if you are not sure why you are taking this drug.

Note: This medication may not have formal approval by regulatory agencies such as Health Canada or the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for use in children or adolescents for some or all of the above uses.

How does your doctor decide on the dosage?

The dose of lithium is different for every patient and is based on how much lithium is in your blood, as well as the response to treatment. Your doctor will measure the lithium level in your blood on a regular basis during the first few months. The lithium level that is usually found to be effective for most patients is between 0.6 and 1.2 mmol/L (mEq/L).

You may initially take your medication two or three times a day; after several weeks, your doctor may decide to prescribe lithium once daily. It is important to drink 8–12 cups of fluid daily when taking lithium (e.g., water, juice, milk, broth, etc.). On the morning of your lithium blood test, take the morning dose of lithium **after** the test to avoid inaccurate results.

How quickly will the drug start working?

Control of manic symptoms may require up to 14 days of treatment. Because lithium takes time to work, **do not decrease or increase the dose or stop the medication** without discussing this with your doctor.

Improvement in symptoms of depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and cluster headaches as well as aggression/impulsivity also occur gradually.

How long should you take this medication?

This depends on what type of illness you have and how well you do. Following the first episode of mania, it is usually recommended that lithium be continued for a minimum of 1 year; this decreases the chance of having another episode. Your doctor may then decrease the drug slowly and monitor for any symptoms; if none occur, the drug can gradually be stopped.

For individuals who have had several episodes of mania or depression, lithium may need to be continued indefinitely. Long-term treatment is generally recommended for recurring depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, cluster headaches or aggression/impulsivity.

DO NOT STOP taking your medication if you are feeling better, without first discussing this with your doctor.

What side effects may happen?

Side effects may happen with any drug. They are not usually serious and do not happen to everyone. Side effects may sometimes occur before beneficial effects of the medication are noticed. If you think you may be having a side effect, speak to your doctor or pharmacist as they can help you decrease it or cope with it.

Common side effects that should be reported to your doctor at the **NEXT VISIT** include:

- Feeling tired, difficulty concentrating – this problem usually goes away with time. Use of other drugs that make you drowsy will worsen the problem. Avoid driving a car or operating machinery if drowsiness persists.
- Nausea or heartburn – if this happens, take the medication with food. If vomiting or diarrhea occur and persist for more than 24 hours, call your doctor.
- Muscle tremor, weakness, shakiness, stiffness – speak to your doctor as this may require a change in your dosage.
- For adolescents: changes in sex drive or sexual performance – discuss this with your doctor.
- Weight changes – watch the type of food you eat; avoid foods with a high fat or sugar content (e.g., cakes and pastry).
- Increased thirst and increase in how often you pee – discuss this with your doctor.
- Skin changes, e.g., dry skin, acne, rashes.

Side effects you should report RIGHT AWAY, as they may indicate the amount of lithium in the body is higher than it should be, include:

- Loss of balance
- Slurred speech
- Visual disturbances (e.g., double vision)
- Nausea, vomiting, stomach ache
- Watery stools, diarrhea (more than twice a day)
- Abnormal general weakness or drowsiness
- Marked trembling (e.g., shaking that interferes with holding a cup), muscle twitches, jaw shaking.

IF THESE OCCUR CALL YOUR DOCTOR RIGHT AWAY. If you cannot reach your doctor, stop taking lithium until you get in touch with him/her. Drink plenty of fluids and eat some salty foods (e.g., chips, crackers). If symptoms continue to get worse or if they do not clear within 12 hours, go to the Emergency Department of the nearest hospital. A clinical check-up and a blood test may show the cause of the problem.

Rare side effects you should report to your doctor **RIGHT AWAY** include:

- Sore mouth, gums or throat
- Skin rash or itching, swelling of the face
- Nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, feeling tired, weak, feverish or like you have the flu
- Swelling of the neck (goiter)

- Abnormally frequent need to pee and increased thirst (e.g., having to get up in the night several times to pee)
- Thoughts of suicide

Let your doctor know **right away** if you miss your period or think you may be **pregnant**, plan to become pregnant, or are breastfeeding.

What should you do if you forget to take a dose of your medication?

If you take your total dose of lithium in the morning or evening and you forget to take it for more than 6 hours, skip the missed dose and continue with your schedule the next day. **DO NOT DOUBLE THE DOSE.** If you take the drug several times a day, take the missed dose when you remember, then continue with your regular schedule.

Is this drug safe to take with other medication?

Because lithium can change the effect of other medication or may be affected by other medication, always check with your doctor or pharmacist before taking other drugs, including over-the-counter medication such as cold remedies and herbal preparations. Always inform any doctor or dentist that you see that you are taking lithium.

Precautions/considerations

1. Do not change your dose or stop the drug without talking to your doctor.
2. This drug may impair the mental and physical abilities and reaction time required for driving a car or operating other machinery. Avoid these activities if you feel drowsy or slowed down.
3. Do not stop your drug suddenly as this may result in withdrawal symptoms such as anxiety, irritability, and changes in mood.
4. Report any changes in mood or behavior to your doctor.

What else do I need to know about lithium?

1. It is important to drink 8–12 cups of fluids daily (e.g., water, juice, milk, broth, etc.).
2. Limit the number of caffeinated liquids you drink (e.g., coffee, tea, caffeine-containing soft drinks), and avoid excessive alcohol use.
3. To treat occasional pain, avoid the use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (e.g., ibuprofen (Motrin, Advil) or naproxen (Aleve, Naprosyn)) as they can affect the blood level of lithium and may result in toxicity. Acetaminophen (Tylenol) is a safer alternative.
4. Do not change your salt intake during your treatment without first speaking to your doctor (e.g., avoid no-salt or low-salt diets).
5. If you have the flu, especially if vomiting or diarrhea occur, check with your doctor regarding your lithium dose.
6. Use extra care in hot weather and during activities that cause you to sweat heavily (e.g., hot baths, saunas, exercising). The loss of too much water and salt from your body may lead to changes in the level of lithium in your body and increased side effects, some of which may be serious.
7. If you take sustained-release lithium tablets (Lithobid, Lithmax), the tablets should be swallowed whole, and not chewed or crushed. Lithmax tablets may be split.
8. On the morning when blood is drawn for a lithium level, withhold your morning dose of lithium until after the blood draw.
9. Store your medication in a clean, dry area at room temperature. Keep all medication out of the reach of children.

If you have any questions regarding this medication, please ask your doctor, pharmacist, or nurse.