



Patient & Family Guide

2023

Lithium



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Lithium

Lithium is a mood stabilizer. It is most often used in bipolar disorder to prevent or treat mania or depression.

How do I take lithium?

- Lithium is taken orally (by mouth) as capsules or long-acting tablets.
- Lithium is usually taken once a day at bedtime, but may be taken 2 or 3 times a day. Your health care provider will talk with you about what is best for you.

What symptoms will lithium help with?

- Lithium treats different symptoms depending on why it is being used. Symptoms will be different for each person.
- Symptoms of **mania** may include:
 - › Feeling like you need less sleep
 - › More talkative
 - › More active
 - › More irritable
 - › Easily distracted
 - › Feeling important, powerful, or like nothing can hurt you
 - › Making choices without thinking them through

- Symptoms of **depression** may include:
 - › Low mood
 - › Feeling sad or tearful
 - › Changes in your usual sleep pattern
 - › Changes in your appetite or weight
 - › Having less energy or feeling tired
 - › Having trouble thinking, making decisions, or remembering things
 - › Feeling hopeless or helpless
 - › Feeling very guilty or having low self-worth
 - › Physical problems without a clear cause
 - › Thoughts of dying or suicide

There may be other reasons lithium was chosen for you. Talk to your health care provider to learn why it was prescribed for you.

How is my dose of lithium chosen?

- Your dose of lithium is based on how much lithium is in your blood and how you respond to treatment.
- You will need blood work to measure your lithium levels to make sure that you are getting the right dose.
- You will need blood work more often when you first start treatment, and less often over time.

How quickly will lithium work?

- Your symptoms will improve over time. It may take 10 to 14 days before you feel the full effect.
- You may be given other medications to help with your symptoms until the lithium starts working.

How long should I take lithium?

- This depends on why you are taking lithium and how well it works for you. Long term use is common when lithium is used to treat bipolar disorder.
- Lithium helps to treat your symptoms and to keep them from coming back.
- **Do not stop taking lithium without talking to your health care provider.** Your symptoms may come back if you stop taking it.

What are the possible side effects?

- Many side effects start early and go away with time. Other side effects only start after taking lithium for a longer time
- Some side effects are mild and others are more serious.

- **Talk about side effects with your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist before you start treatment and regularly while taking lithium.**
- **Common:**
 - › Nausea (feeling sick to your stomach)
 - › Vomiting (throwing up)
 - › Diarrhea (loose, watery poop)
 - › Feeling weak
 - › Feeling tired
 - › Trouble concentrating
 - › Weight gain
 - › A small amount of shaking in your hands
 - › Feeling more thirsty
 - › Peeing more often
 - › Sexual dysfunction (less interest in sex or problems having sex)
 - › Dry skin
 - › Acne
 - › Thyroid changes
- **Less common:**
 - › Slow heartbeat
 - › Heart rhythm changes
 - › Changes in your period
 - › Hair thinning
 - › Rash
 - › Decreased kidney function

Signs of lithium toxicity (too much lithium)

Call 911 or go to the nearest Emergency Department right away if you have:

- › Loss of balance
- › Slurred speech
- › More nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
- › Tremors (shaking) in 1 or both hands that stop you from holding a cup
- › Tremors in other parts of your body
- › Muscle spasms
- › More drowsiness or weakness
- › Confusion
- › Seizures

What else do I need to know about lithium?

- Blood work to check your lithium levels is usually done in the morning. If you take lithium in the morning, **do not** take it until after your blood work is done.
- It is important to drink 8 to 12 glasses of water or fluids every day.
- Limit how much caffeine you drink (like coffee, tea, dark pop) and avoid drinking alcohol.

- Talk with your health care provider before changing how much salt you eat. This can affect the amount of lithium in your body.
- Many medications may affect lithium levels. Check with your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist before starting any new medications, including over-the-counter medications, natural health products, or vitamins.
- If you are sick (especially if you are vomiting or have diarrhea) talk with your health care provider about whether you should take lithium that day.
- **Be very careful in hot weather and during activities that make you sweat a lot.** Losing water and salt can raise the amount of lithium in your body.
- Tell your health care provider right away if you think you are pregnant, plan to become pregnant, or are breastfeeding or chestfeeding.

Notes:

This pamphlet is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice or professional judgment of a health care provider. The information may not apply to all situations. If you have any questions, please ask your health care provider.

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The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years or as needed.