

## Lithium *(say lih-thee-uhm)*

### What is lithium?

This medicine is used to stabilize a person's moods – called a mood stabilizer. It is most commonly used to treat bipolar disorder. Sometimes it is used together with other medicines to treat different illnesses, like depression.

You are taking this medicine for:

- Bipolar Disorder
- Depression
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

### How does lithium work?

Bipolar disorder can happen when the chemicals in your brain are out-of-balance.

Symptoms of bipolar disorder can last several days or longer and might include:

- Mania - uncontrollable racing thoughts, less need for sleep, risky behavior, feeling irritable or rage, feeling invincible or on top of the world, rapid speech
- Depression - feeling hopeless, poor sleep, poor appetite, negative thoughts, trouble concentrating, no interest in activities you once enjoyed, thoughts of death or suicide

Lithium works by restoring the balance of the brain's chemicals, which can help:

- treat symptoms of mania and/or depression
- reduce how often and the extent of periods of mania and/or depression
- improve sleep

It can also help reduce how often you need to be in the hospital during mania or depression episodes.

### How quickly will it start working?

Some symptoms of bipolar disorder might get better before others.

- To treat a new episode of mania, it can take a few days to weeks for you to respond to the medicine.
- To stabilize your mood, it can take a few weeks to months before you feel the full effects of this medicine.

### How do I take lithium?

- Take lithium regularly as prescribed.
- You can take it with or without food.
- It is important to drink fluids throughout the day. Water is best.
- If you miss a dose, take it as soon as possible.
- If it is almost time for your next dose, skip the missed dose and return to your regular schedule. Do not take 2 doses at the same time.
- If your doctor has sent you to have your blood tested for the amount of lithium in your body and you usually take a dose of lithium in the morning, take your morning lithium dose after your blood test.

### Why is it important to keep taking it?

- Always take the amount you are supposed to take (the dose written on the prescription label). Do not change how much you take. Do not stop taking it without talking to your doctor.
- If you do not take it as prescribed, the amount of lithium in your body can get too low or too high, making it not work and increase the chance of side effects.

## What should I look out for?

Here are some possible side effects and what to do if you notice them.

### Common Side Effects



a) **Increased thirst and going pee more than usual**

Common and usually goes away with time.  
Tell your doctor and/or pharmacist right away if you think you are drinking too much water, and/or you are getting up several times at night to pee.



b) **Shakiness of the hands** (fine tremors)

Common and usually goes away with time.  
If it gets worse or does not go away, it could mean your body has too much lithium. See your doctor as soon as possible.



c) **Drowsiness**

Take this medicine at bedtime to reduce daytime drowsiness. Caution: It is dangerous to drive or operate machinery when drowsy.



d) **Weight gain**

Choose healthy foods and exercise regularly.  
Drink water, instead of sugary beverages



e) **Loose bowel movements** (diarrhea)

If you have diarrhea, it can mean your lithium dose is too high.  
Tell your doctor right away.



f) **Feeling sick to the stomach** (nausea)

Take lithium with food. Drink water.  
Eat small meals more often during the day.



g) **Skin changes**

You might get acne, dry skin, and/or rashes.  
Talk to your doctor and/or pharmacist about ways to improve skin side effects.

### Rare but Serious Side Effects

a) **Lithium toxicity**

The right dose of lithium varies from person to person.  
Your doctor will send you for blood tests to check if the lithium in your body is at a safe level.

Remember: If you take a morning dose of lithium, take it after your blood test.

Watch for symptoms of too much lithium in your body:

- loss of balance
- slurred speech
- change in vision (such as double vision)
- very tired and drowsy
- nausea
- vomiting
- stomach ache
- diarrhea (more than 2 times a day)
- increased trembling (such as shaking so much you can't hold a cup)
- muscle twitches
- jaw shaking

b) **Kidney damage**

Lithium is a salt and it can damage your kidneys when taken over a number of years.

Your regular blood tests for lithium will also include a check of how your kidneys are working. Depending on the results, your doctor will adjust the lithium as needed.

c) **Low thyroid hormone**

Lithium can decrease how much thyroid hormone the body makes.

Your regular blood tests for lithium will also include a check of your thyroid hormone level. Depending on the results, your doctor might prescribe a thyroid supplement.

### When should I get help?

#### See your doctor as soon as possible if:

- Your symptoms of bipolar disorder are getting worse or returning.
- You are feeling hopeless, or you feel that there is no way to solve the problem or end the pain.
- Any of the common side effects do not go away or gets worse.
- You start noticing symptoms of lithium toxicity. If you cannot reach your doctor, stop taking lithium, drink lots of water, and eat salty foods like potato chips or crackers. Get in to see your doctor as soon as you can.

#### Go to the nearest Emergency Department if:

- Any symptoms of lithium toxicity get worse or they do not go away after 12 hours.
- You feel like acting on thoughts of harming yourself and/or others.

#### Call 9-1-1 if:

- You have any chest pain or shortness of breath.
- You faint.
- You have a blackout, or a fit (seizure).

### What else should I know?

#### How your lithium level can change:

- The amount of lithium in your body can change with:
  - other medicines, such as some pain medications (like naproxen and ibuprofen), or blood pressure medications (like ramipril or hydrochlorothiazide)
  - salt
  - dehydration

#### To keep the amount of lithium in your body at a safe level:

- Always check with your doctor and/or pharmacist before taking any new medicines, including prescription, over-the-counter, and herbal medicines.
- Do not suddenly change the amount of salt in your diet.
- Make sure to drink water throughout the day (8 to 10 cups).
- Try to not drink alcohol or caffeine beverages (such as coffee, cola, cocoa, tea). These can cause dehydration.

### It's good to ask questions

Anytime you have any questions or concerns about taking this medicine, talk with one of your healthcare team.

**Call 8-1-1 (HealthLinkBC)** after hours and for any other health advice.

HealthLinkBC is open 24 hours a day and available in 130 languages. For an interpreter, say your language in English. Wait until an interpreter comes on the phone.

This information does not replace the advice given to you by your healthcare provider.