



Lithium

(Pronounced lith-ee-um)

Why has lithium been prescribed?

Lithium is a mood stabiliser. These medications can be prescribed to treat mood disorders.

What are the benefits of taking lithium?

Mood stabilisers are effective in reducing the severity of the symptoms of depression and mania. They also shorten the time to recovery and prevent depression and mania returning.

Are there any precautions with lithium?

Lithium is suitable for most people. As with all medicines, however, there are precautions. Your prescriber will usually check that it is safe to prescribe lithium, but let your prescriber know if any of the following apply to you, as extra care may be needed:

- a) If you have epilepsy, diabetes, Addison's disease or suffer from heart, liver, kidney or thyroid trouble.
- b) If you are taking any other medication especially medication for schizophrenia, anxiety or insomnia, medication for high blood pressure or irregular heart beat, antibiotics, methyl dopa, theophylline, steroids, anticonvulsants, antidepressants or anti-inflammatory drugs. Also, tell your prescriber if you buy any medicine 'over the counter' from a pharmacy or supermarket. Please also tell your prescriber if you take any alternative or complementary medicine such as Chinese herbal medicines. St John's Wort should not be taken by patients prescribed lithium.
- c) If you are pregnant, breast feeding, or wish to become pregnant.
- d) If you have an intolerance to lactose as this is an ingredient of the Liskonum brand of tablets and Li-Liquid brand of liquid (all other brands should be fine but check with your pharmacist if you are unsure).

What is the usual dose of lithium?

The starting dose is usually 400mg daily. The dose is then usually slowly increased. The usual dose of lithium may be between 400mg and 1200mg daily. It may take some time to get to the dose that is most suitable.

How should lithium be taken?

Lithium is usually taken once a day at night. However, you and your prescriber may decide that it is better for you to take the medicine at another time.

What form does lithium come in?

Lithium is available in different formulations which contain different quantities of lithium salts, although Priadel is the most commonly used. Priadel contains lithium carbonate, it is available as tablets in strengths of 200mg and 400mg. Camcolit contains lithium carbonate and is available as tablets in strengths of 250mg and 400mg. Liskonium contains lithium carbonate available as 450mg tablets. There are also liquids, Li-Liquid which contains lithium citrate and is available as 509mg per 5ml and Priadel liquid which contains lithium citrate and is available as 520mg per 5ml.

What should be done if a dose is missed?

If you forget a dose, take it as soon as you remember. If you miss a whole day's dose – just carry on as normal with the next day's dose. If you miss more than a day's dose, speak to your prescriber.

What will happen when lithium is first taken?

Lithium, like many medicines, does not work straight away. For example, it may take several days or even weeks for some symptoms to improve. To begin with, some people find that lithium may help them feel more calm and relaxed. Later, (usually after a few days or more) other symptoms should begin to improve. Many people do not experience any side effects. However some people may experience some side effects. We have listed potential side effects in the table below, whether or not they are likely to be short or long-term and what measures can be taken is also described. There are other possible side effects – we have listed only the most important ones. Ask your doctor, pharmacist or nurse if you are worried about anything else that you think might be a side effect. Further information on side effects is available in the official manufacturer's leaflet.

Reporting side effects

The 'Yellow Card' scheme encourages patients to report any side effects that they feel may be caused by their medication. Ask your doctor, pharmacist, or nurse for the forms if you wish to report any side effects. Alternatively, telephone 0800 100 3352 or go to www.mhra.gov.uk.

Is lithium addictive?

Lithium is not addictive, but if you stop taking the medicine suddenly, you may experience unpleasant physical feelings. Also stopping lithium suddenly is known to be associated with relapse.

What about alcohol?

It is recommended that people taking lithium should not drink alcohol. This is because both mood stabilisers and alcohol can cause drowsiness. If the two are taken together, severe drowsiness can result. This can lead to falls and accidents. As well as this, drinking alcohol may make mania, depression and anxiety worse. Also, alcohol may alter the level of lithium in the blood. However, once people are used to taking medication, then *very small amounts* of alcohol may not be harmful. It pays to be very careful, because alcohol affects people in different ways, especially when they are taking medication. Never drink alcohol and drive. Discuss any concerns you have with your doctor, pharmacist or nurse.

Is it OK to stop taking lithium when symptoms go away?

No. If you stop taking lithium, your original symptoms are very likely to return. Most people need to remain on lithium for quite a long time, sometimes years. You should always discuss with your prescriber any plans you have to reduce or stop any of your prescribed medicines.

Are there any alternatives to lithium?

Yes, there are alternatives available. Although mood stabilisers have broadly similar therapeutic effects they differ in the side effects they produce. There are several mood stabilisers available so most people can find one which suits them. Psychological therapies can also help in bipolar disorder usually in addition to medication.

Further information?

Lithium blood levels need to be monitored by regular blood testing. This is to help decide on the correct dose of lithium and also to check levels don't become too high. If levels of lithium are too high you may experience severe tremor, blurred vision, vomiting, diarrhoea, disorientation and unsteadiness. If you experience any of these symptoms contact your prescriber immediately.

Summary of side effects



Thirst - Common

What can be done about it?

You may feel more thirsty and need to drink more. Avoid fizzy or sugary drinks. Tell your prescriber if thirst becomes troublesome.



Polyuria – Common (needing to pass water frequently)

What can be done about it?

This may wear off in time. Tell your prescriber if it persists or is troublesome.



Weight gain – Common

What can be done about it?

Most people will put on a few pounds. Try to eat healthily and take exercise.



Tremor – Common (slight shaking of the hands)

What can be done about it?

This usually occurs when lithium is started or the dose is increased. Discuss with your prescriber if this persists or becomes worse.

Other (less common) side effects	How common is it and what can be done about it?
Nausea	<p>Uncommon This usually occurs when lithium is started. Taking the medication with food or after food may help. Discuss with your prescriber if this persists or if vomiting occurs.</p>

Diarrhoea – loose stools	Uncommon This should wear off within a few days. Discuss with your prescriber if this persists.
Abdominal pain	Uncommon These effects usually occur when lithium is started or the dose is increased. Discuss with your prescriber if these effects persist. It may be necessary to alter the dose or preparation of lithium.
Ataxia (unsteadiness)	Uncommon These effects usually occur when lithium is started or the dose is increased. Discuss with your prescriber if these effects persist. It may be necessary to alter the dose or preparation of lithium.
Drowsiness	Uncommon These effects usually occur when lithium is started or the dose is increased. Discuss with your prescriber if these effects persist. It may be necessary to alter the dose or preparation of lithium.
Double vision	Rare These effects usually occur when lithium is started or the dose is increased. Discuss with your prescriber if these effects persist. It may be necessary to alter the dose or preparation of lithium.
Oedema (swelling of ankles)	Rare Tell your prescriber if this occurs.
Sexual dysfunction - reduced libido (desire)	Rare Any changes should be reported to your prescriber. It may be necessary to switch to another medication. Symptoms should go away when switched to another medication.

Very common = almost everyone affected

Common = many people affected

Uncommon = some people affected

Rare = few people affected

Very rare = very few or no one affected

Disclaimer

This leaflet does not replace the official manufacturer's Patient Information Leaflet.

For more information, visit www.slam.nhs.uk/meds or speak to a health care professional.

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