

Lithium (pron. lith-e-umm)

What is lithium used for?

Lithium carbonate or lithium citrate (also known as Camcolit[®], Priadel[®] or Liskonum[®]) is mainly used to help prevent the symptoms of bipolar mood disorder returning. It can also be used to help the symptoms of mania, aggression and cluster headaches. It is made as tablets and as a syrup.

What is the usual dose of lithium?

The usual dose of lithium is around 400-1000mg a day, but this will depend on the results of your blood tests.

How should I take lithium?

Swallow the tablets with at least half a glass of water whilst sitting or standing. This is to make sure that they reach the stomach and do not stick in your throat. For the liquid, use a medicine spoon, dropper or oral syringe. Use it carefully to make sure you measure the correct amount.

When should I take lithium?

Lithium is best taken once a day at bedtime, or in the morning.

What are the alternatives to lithium?

There are many other medicines (e.g. valproate, carbamazepine, quetiapine, olanzapine), talking therapies and treatments for bipolar disorder and other conditions. See our "Handy charts" to help you compare the medicines, how they work and their side effects.

How long will lithium take to work?

Generally lithium may take several weeks to start to work, and the effect builds over the next few months. Please look at one of the "Handy charts" for more help and advice.

How long will I need to keep taking lithium for?

If you are taking it for bipolar disorder, you should take it for at least two years (better at least three years). See one of our "Handy charts" for more advice on how long you might need to take it for.

Is lithium addictive?

Lithium is not addictive, but please see the next question.

Can I stop taking lithium suddenly?

It is very unwise to stop taking lithium suddenly, even if you feel better. When the time comes, you should withdraw lithium by a gradual reduction in the dose over at least 4 weeks, if not 3 months. If you stop quicker, it will make your symptoms much more likely to return. Even just running out of tablets can make this happen so try not to run out. Obviously if you have got a very high or toxic level you may need to stop taking lithium suddenly. You should discuss this fully with your doctor, nurse or pharmacist.

What should I do if I forget to take a dose of lithium?

Take the missed dose as soon as you remember unless it is within about 10 hours of your next dose. If you remember after this just take the next dose as normal. Do not try to catch up by taking two doses at once as you may get more side-effects. If you have problems remembering your doses (as many people do) ask your pharmacist, doctor or nurse about this. There are some special packs that can be used to help you remember.

Can I drink alcohol while I am taking lithium?

If you drink alcohol while taking lithium it may make you feel more sleepy. This is particularly important if you need to drive or operate machinery and you must seek advice on this.

Will lithium affect my other medication?

Lithium has many important interactions with other medicines:

- The effects of lithium can be increased by ACE inhibitors (e.g. captopril, enalapril, lisinopril, ramipril), some diuretics or water tablets (e.g. bendroflumethiazide or co-amilozide)
- Lithium levels can be increased by NSAIDs (used for arthritis or pain, e.g. aspirin, ibuprofen, naproxen, diclofenac, mefenamic acid) or COX-2 inhibitors (used for pain or arthritis e.g. celecoxib, etoricoxib).
- The effect of lithium can be decreased by theophylline or aminophylline.
- You should have no problems with "The Contraceptive Pill" and lithium.

Not all of these interactions happen in everyone. Some of these medicines can still be used together but you will need to follow your doctor's instructions carefully and may need more blood tests. There are many other

possible drug interactions. Make sure your doctor, pharmacist or nurse knows about your lithium. Paracetamol is safe in normal doses.

What sort of side-effects might occur if I am taking lithium?

The table below will show you some of the main side effects you might get from lithium.

Side effect	What happens	What to do about it
COMMON (more than about 1 in 10 people might get these)		
Tremor	Fine shaking of the hands	This is not dangerous but can be irritating. If it annoys you, your doctor may be able to give you something for it (e.g. propranolol). If it gets worse and spreads to your legs or jaw, see your doctor straight away.
Stomach upset	This includes feeling and being sick and getting diarrhoea	If mild, see your pharmacist. If it lasts for more than a day, see your doctor.
Polyuria	Passing a lot of urine.	Don't drink too much alcohol. Tell your doctor about it. Some blood and urine tests may be needed.
Metallic taste	Your mouth tastes as if has had metal or something bitter in it.	This should wear off after a few weeks. If it does not, mention this to your doctor next time you meet. A change in dose may help.
Polydipsia	Feeling very thirsty. Your mouth is dry and there may be a metallic taste.	Drink water or low calorie drinks in moderation. Suck sugar-free gum or boiled sweets.
UNCOMMON (less than about 1 in 10 people might get these)		
Weight gain and fluid retention (oedema)	Puffy legs, eating and drinking more and putting on weight.	A diet full of vegetables, cereal and fruit may help prevent weight gain. Seek help from a dietician.
Hypothyroidism	Low thyroid activity - this makes you feel tired.	This is generally mild and fairly easily treated, although if your thyroid gets very low this can be serious. Tell your doctor – you may need thyroid replacement tablets.
RARE (less than about 1 in 100 people might get these)		
Skin rashes	Blotches seen on the skin.	See your doctor straight away.
OTHER		
Blurred vision	Things look fuzzy and you can't focus your eyes properly.	If this is unexpected, unusual or worse than usual, your lithium level may be too high. Do not take any more doses of lithium and talk to your doctor straight away.
Sleepiness	Feeling extra sleepy and sluggish in the daytime.	
Confusion	Your mind is all mixed up.	
Palpitations	A fast heart beat.	

Do not be worried by this list of side effects. Some people get no side effects at all and others may get some effects that are not listed in this table. If you think you might have a side effect to your medicine, you should ask your doctor, nurse or pharmacist. If you want to know more, go to our website for links to other websites with more information.

Will I need a blood test if I am taking lithium?

You will need regular blood tests while you are taking lithium. Once you are on a steady dose, you should have a blood test every 3 months to check your lithium blood or plasma levels. Every six months you should also have a test on your thyroid and kidney. This can be using the regular blood sample.

Can I drive or cycle while I am taking lithium?

You may feel a bit drowsy at first when taking lithium. You should be careful as it may slow down your reaction times. Until this wears off, or you know how lithium affects you, do not drive or operate machinery.

The small print: This leaflet is to help you understand about your medicine. You should also read the manufacturer's Patient Information Leaflet (PIL). You may find lots more on the internet but beware as internet-based information is not always accurate. Do not share medicines with anyone else. Go to our website for fuller answers to these and many other questions e.g. driving, women's health, how it works, doses and interactions, and about the conditions. The "Handy charts" will help you compare the main medicines for each condition, how they work and their side effects.