



## Lithium

*BQIS Fact Sheets provide a general overview on topics important to supporting an individual's health and safety and to improving their quality of life. This document provides general information on the topic and is not intended to replace team assessment, decision-making, or medical advice. This is the fourth of ten Fact Sheets regarding psychotropic medications.*

## Intended Outcomes

Individuals will understand why lithium is prescribed, how it works, the range and severity of side effects, how the physician monitors this medicine, and the actions needed to support someone on these medications.

## Definitions

**Lithium (lithium carbonate, Eskalith, Lithobid, Eskalith CR (controlled-release), lithium citrate):** Medication used to decrease mood swings, some types of depression, or to reduce serious aggressive outbursts.

**Depression:** A mental state characterized by sad feelings of gloom and inadequacy.

**Mania:** An abnormally happy mental state, typically characterized by exaggerated feelings of happiness, lack of inhibitions, racing thoughts, less need for sleep, talkativeness, risk taking, and irritability.

## Facts

- Lithium is available in:
  - Liquid and tablets (depending on the form given, lithium should be taken one to four times a day as prescribed)
- This medicine works by decreasing:
  - Mood swings
  - Depression
  - Mania
  - Severe aggressive outbursts
- Common side effects (may decrease after several weeks):
  - Weight gain
  - Upset stomach, nausea, vomiting (may decrease if taken with food)



### FACT SHEET

- Diarrhea
- Drinking more
- Urinating more
- Tremor in the hands
- Sedation/drowsiness
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Occasional side effects (needs to be reported to the physician within one week):
  - Thyroid dysfunction (signs and symptoms include: feeling cold, weight gain, coarse hair, feeling tired, a lump on the front of the neck)
  - Acne or psoriasis (new or worsened)
  - Wetting the bed
- Signs that the lithium level may be too high (needs to be reported to the physician immediately and lithium should be stopped):
  - Vomiting or diarrhea (several times a day)
  - An increase in tremors
  - Less coordination, unsteadiness when standing/walking or extreme dizziness
  - Feeling excessively sleepy
  - Trouble speaking/slurred speech
  - Confusion
- Signs that the lithium level may be dangerously high (go to the emergency room immediately)
  - Irregular heartbeat
  - Fainting
  - Staggering
  - Blurred vision
  - Ringing/buzzing noise in the ears
  - Unable to urinate
  - Muscle twitching



- Seizure
- Unconsciousness
- How the physician monitors this medicine:
  - Blood test on a regular basis to monitor the lithium level in the blood
  - Blood tests to check kidney, thyroid levels, and blood count
  - Blood draw should occur first thing in the morning (before the first dose of lithium)

### Recommended Actions and Prevention Strategies

1. Give medications as prescribed.
2. Watch for anything different or a change in status of the individual and for signs and symptoms of medication side effects.
3. Write down any noted signs and symptoms of medication side effects or changes in the individual.
4. Tell your supervisor or nurse about any noted signs and symptoms of medication side effects or changes in status of the individual immediately.
5. Seek medical attention as indicated according to the seriousness of the symptoms as listed above.
6. Watch for the effectiveness of medication by writing down notes on the behavior of the individual that relate to diagnosis.
7. Make sure blood tests for lithium levels are done before the first dose of lithium for the day.
8. Make sure all blood tests are completed as prescribed.
9. Watch for and takes notes on fluid intake and output (urination) as directed.



### Learning Assessment

The following questions can be used to verify a person's competency regarding the material contained in this Fact Sheet:

1. Lithium is used to decrease all except:
  - A. Depression
  - B. Mania
  - C. Mood swings
  - D. Auditory hallucinations
2. Common side effects of lithium include:
  - A. Weight gain
  - B. Muscle twitching
  - C. Seizures
  - D. Hair Loss
3. Signs that the lithium level may be too high include:
  - A. Weight gain
  - B. Confusion
  - C. Trouble speaking
  - D. B and C
4. Signs that the lithium level may be dangerously high include:
  - A. Irregular heartbeat
  - B. Irritability
  - C. Bed-wetting
  - D. Hair loss



5. To help monitor the condition of someone receiving lithium, it is important to do all of the following except:
  - A. Watch for any changes in the individual
  - B. Write down observations of possible side effects of medications
  - C. Make sure blood draws for lithium levels are done in the late afternoon after at least one (1) dose of lithium that day
  - D. Seek emergency medical attention immediately if the individual exhibits signs and symptoms such as irregular heartbeat, seizures, staggering, and unconsciousness

### References

Mayo Clinic. Lithium side effects. Retrieved 08/01/2015 from <http://www.mayoclinic.org/drugs-supplements/lithium-oral-route/side-effects/drg-20064603>.

National Alliance on Mental Illness. (2015). Lithium. Retrieved 08/01/2015 from <https://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Treatment/Mental-Health-Medications/Lithium>.

U. S. National Library of Medicine: MedlinePlus. Lithium. Retrieved 08/01/2015 from <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginfo/meds/a681039.html>.

Psychiatric Medication Series Fact Sheets: “Atypical Antipsychotics”, “Typical Antipsychotics”, “Depakote”, “SS-RIs and SNRIs”, and “Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome”.

### Learning Assessment Answers

1. D
2. A
3. D
4. A
5. C