

HEALTH & SAFETY: PSYCHIATRIC MEDICATIONS

“Lithium”

BQIS/Outreach 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 is the fourth of ten Fact Sheets regarding Psychotropic Medications.

Objectives

Individuals will understand why lithium is prescribed, how it works, common side effects of lithium, occasional side effects of lithium, signs and symptoms that the lithium level may be too high, how the physician monitors this medicine, and the actions needed to support someone on these medications.

Definitions

Lithium (Lithium Carbonate, Eskaltih, Lithobid, Eskalith CR, Lithium Citrate): medication used to decrease mood swings, some types of depression, or to decrease 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, diminished 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.
 - Decreasing depression.
 - Decreasing mania.
 - Decreasing severe aggressive outbursts.

- Common side effects (may decrease after several weeks):
 - Weight gain
 - Upset stomach, nausea, vomiting (may be lessened if taken with food)
 - Diarrhea
 - Drinking more
 - Urinating more
 - Tremor in the hands
 - Sedation
 - Headache
 - Dizziness
- Occasional side effects (Needs to be reported 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 increase)
 - 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
 - An increase in tremors
 - Decrease in coordination or unsteadiness when standing/walking or extreme dizziness
 - Increase in sleepiness that is excessive
 - Trouble speaking/slurred speech
 - Confusion
- Signs that the Lithium level maybe dangerously high (Need to go to the ER 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 draw should occur first thing in the morning (prior to the am dose of Lithium)
 - Blood tests to check kidney, thyroid levels, and blood count

Recommended Actions and Prevention Strategies

1. Administer medications as prescribed
2. Watch for anything different/change in status about the person and for signs and symptoms of side effects of medications
3. Document noted signs and symptoms of side effects of medications and changes in status of the person
4. Communicate noted signs and symptoms of side effects of medications and changes in status of the person to supervisor/nurse immediately
5. Seek medical attention as indicated according to the seriousness of symptoms as listed above
6. Monitor for effectiveness of medication by documenting target behavior data that relate to diagnosis
7. Ensure blood tests for Lithium levels are done before the first dose of Lithium for the day
8. Ensure all blood tests are completed as prescribed
9. Monitor and document fluid intake and output as directed

Learning Assessment

Questions that can be used to verify a person's competency in 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 person
 - B. Document observations of possible side effects of medications
 - C. Ensure blood draws for lithium levels are done in the late afternoon after at least one dose of lithium that day
 - D. Seek emergency medical attention immediately if the person exhibits signs and symptoms such as irregular heartbeat, seizures, staggering, and unconsciousness.

References

- Dulcan MK (editor). Helping Parents, Youth, and Teachers Understand Medications for Behavioral and Emotional Problems: A Resource Book of Medication Information Handouts, Third Edition. Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Publishing, 2007
- Stahl SM. Essential Psychopharmacology: The Prescriber's Guide. Cambridge, UK, The Press Syndicate of The University of Cambridge, 2005
- Craig A. Erickson, M.D. Assistant Professor of Psychiatry; Chief, Fragile X Syndrome Clinic Indiana University School of Medicine; Riley Hospital Child & Adolescent Psychiatry Clinic

Related Resources

- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry www.aacap.org/cs/forFamilies
- National Institute of Mental Health
nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/mental-health-medications/complete-index.shtml
- Psychiatric Medication Series Fact Sheets: “Atypical Antipsychotics”, “Typical Antipsychotics”, “Depakote”, “SSRIs and SNRIs”, and “Neuroleptic Malignant Syndrome”

Learning Assessment Answers

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

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