

Lithium

Lithobid, Eskalith (discontinued), lithium carbonate, lithium citrate, a mood stabilizer

Lithium calms mania and keeps bipolar mood swings from coming back, and it is checked with regular blood tests.

WHAT IT TREATS

Bipolar mania and upkeep

HOW YOU TAKE IT

Daily with food, plus labs

WHEN IT WORKS

Mania 1-2 wks; full by 6

HABIT FORMING

No

⚠️ IMPORTANT SAFETY WARNING

Lithium can build to a dangerous level only a little above the amount that helps you. You need regular blood tests, and you need one right away if you become dehydrated, get sick, or start a new medicine.

① WHAT THIS MEDICINE DOES

- **Lithium** steadies mood in bipolar disorder. It brings mania down and, taken steadily, keeps the swings from returning.
- It is one of the most effective medicines in all of psychiatry, with more than fifty years of evidence behind it.
- It is the only mood medicine shown to lower the risk of **suicide**, which is a big reason it is still a first choice.
- It is a simple salt, not a sedative. At the right level it steadies your mood without flattening who you are.

🕒 HOW TO TAKE IT

- Take it at the same times each day, with food or milk, which cuts the stomach upset most people notice at the start.
- Swallow long-acting tablets whole. Crushing or chewing releases the whole amount at once and can upset your stomach.
- Drink water steadily and keep your usual amount of salt in your food. A sudden low-salt diet pushes your level up.
- If you miss a dose, take it when you remember unless the next one is close. Never take two doses to catch up.
- For a level check, take your evening dose as usual and have blood drawn about **12 hours** later, before the next dose.

📈 WHAT TO EXPECT

- Mania usually begins to settle within **1 to 2 weeks**, and the full steadying effect builds over about **6 weeks**.
- Working looks like fewer and milder highs and lows, and stretches of ordinary life measured in months, not days.
- Blood tests are not optional here. The helpful amount and the harmful amount sit close together, so the level is watched.
- Expect a level check after each dose change, then a few times a year, plus kidney and thyroid tests on a schedule.
- Many people stay on lithium for years, and that is the point. The protection comes from staying on it steadily.

♥️ COMMON SIDE EFFECTS

- A fine shake in the hands is common. Less caffeine helps, and your prescriber can shift the timing or treat the shake.
- Thirst and needing to pass urine more often. Keep water within reach and say so if it is breaking up your sleep.
- Nausea or loose stools early on. Taking it with food, or moving to a long-acting tablet, settles it for most people.
- Weight can creep up. Choosing water over sweet drinks and building in a daily walk early works better than dieting later.
- Acne, or psoriasis flaring up. A dermatologist has good options, so this is worth a referral rather than quitting.
- Feeling mentally slow or a little dull. Mention it, because the timing or the amount can often be adjusted to help.

⚠️ CALL YOUR PRESCRIBER OR GET HELP RIGHT AWAY IF

- Coarse hand shaking, throwing up, diarrhea, or unsteady walking mean too much lithium. Stop it and call right away.
- Slurred speech, confusion, or heavy drowsiness are late warning signs. Go to the **ER** now, not in the morning.
- Call your prescriber the day you start vomiting, have diarrhea, or run a fever. Your level needs checking fast.
- If thoughts of suicide come, call or text **988** and tell your prescriber. Help is there day and night.

🚫 WHAT TO AVOID

- Skip ibuprofen and naproxen. They push lithium levels up within days. Acetaminophen is usually the safer choice.
- Many blood pressure medicines, including water pills, raise your level. Get a blood test soon after starting any of them.
- Dehydration is the real danger. Heavy sweating, hot weather, saunas, hard workouts, and heavy drinking all concentrate it.
- Do not start a low-salt plan or a crash diet without telling your prescriber, since less salt means more lithium in you.
- Lithium can affect a baby's heart early in pregnancy. Plan any pregnancy with your prescriber instead of stopping alone.

⏸️ STOPPING IT SAFELY

- Never stop lithium suddenly. A fast stop can set off a severe manic episode within weeks, often worse than the last one.
- If you and your prescriber decide to stop, the taper runs **at least 2 to 4 weeks**, and slower is better still.
- Side effects are a reason to adjust, not a reason to disappear. Almost all of them have a fix worth trying first.
- If you do come off it, keep your follow-up visits. Relapse often arrives months later, when everyone has relaxed.

❓ QUESTIONS TO ASK

- How often will I need blood tests, and where do I go for them?
- Which pain relievers are safe for me while I am on lithium?
- What should I do on a very hot day or if I get a stomach bug?
- How would lithium fit with plans for a pregnancy someday?

Where this information comes from

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NOTE

Sources are listed in APA 7th edition style. This handout is general information about a medicine, not medical advice, and it does not replace the instructions from your own prescriber or pharmacist. Never start, change, or stop a medicine on your own. If you think you are having a serious reaction, call your prescriber; if you cannot breathe, cannot stay awake, or are thinking of harming yourself, call 911 or 988 right away.