

# LITHIUM

(Carbolith®, Duralith®, Lithane®)

## PURPOSE

Lithium was originally developed as a mood stabilizer to treat manic depression, also known as bipolar disorder. With bipolar disorder, a person may have mood fluctuations with periods of elated mood (mania, hypomania or “highs”) and periods of low mood (depression or “lows”). If left untreated, these mood swings become emotionally, socially and functionally disabling.

In addition, lithium is sometimes used as a helper medication combined with an antidepressant to treat depression.

Lithium is a simple salt which is similar to table salt (sodium). Bipolar disorder and depression occur due to imbalances of certain chemicals or “messengers” in the brain. Lithium works to restore the balance of certain brain chemicals.

## BENEFITS FROM LITHIUM

- Decrease the frequency and intensity of mood swings
- Decrease the intensity of symptoms during mania (racing thoughts, decreased need for sleep, impulsiveness, irritability, disorganized thoughts, grandiose thoughts or inflated self-image, hallucinations or delusions)
- Decrease the intensity of symptoms during depression (low mood, poor sleep, poor appetite, poor concentration, low energy, negative thoughts, hopelessness, feeling tense, and thoughts of suicide)
- Improve your ability to manage daily stresses and have better control over your emotions
- Improve your sleeping patterns
- May reduce the frequency of hospital stays for mania or depression

## BE PATIENT – it takes a while

In the treatment of mania, it may take up to a few weeks of treatment with lithium to see a response. For mood stabilization, it may take weeks to months to see full benefits.

## PROPER USE

Take this medication ONLY as prescribed by your doctor. DO NOT take more of it or use it more often as recommended because doing so increases the risk of serious side effects. **DO NOT stop this medication suddenly without consulting your doctor.**

**If you forget to take a dose**, you should take it as soon as you remember. If it is close to the time of your next dose, you should skip the missed dose and continue with your regular schedule. Do NOT take 2 doses at once.

## MORE COMMON SIDE EFFECTS

Below are side effects which should be reported to the nurse or physician at your next appointment:

- Occasional loose stools
- Fine tremor of hands
- Nausea
- Increased thirst & passing more urine
- Weight gain
- Edema or water retention
- Skin changes (eg. Dry skin, acne)

## LESS COMMON SIDE EFFECTS

Below are the side effects which must be reported to your doctor **immediately** as they may indicate a higher than desired lithium blood level:

- Diarrhea (more than twice a day)
- Nausea & vomiting, Loss of appetite
- Slurred speech
- Marked tremor (shakiness) of hands (such as interfering with picking up a cup)
- Visual disturbances
- Confusion, Dizziness
- Decreased or no urine output
- General weakness or drowsiness

## PRECAUTIONS

Always inform your physician, nurse, dentist or pharmacist about your medication before any treatment.

**Interactions:** Other medicines including over the counter medication (OTC) such as pain killers may interact dangerously with Lithium. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about any new medications and before you use any OTC products.

Tell your doctor if you are pregnant or breastfeeding before you take this medication.

**Diet:** Lithium blood levels are affected by the amount of salt in the body. Do not suddenly change the amount of salt in the diet. Drinking large amounts of coffee, tea or colas that contain caffeine can reduce the effectiveness of lithium.

**Fluid:** Be sure to drink plenty of water during hot weather or after exercising to prevent dehydration. Dehydration can lead to lithium levels getting too high in the body causing side effects.

**Drug Level Monitoring:** Your doctor may order blood tests to check the Lithium level in your body. DO NOT take your morning lithium dose before your lithium blood test. Take your dose AFTER your blood test. Your lithium level should be checked every 3 months once the lithium dosage is stabilized.

**Other Blood Tests:** Thyroid and kidney function should be checked regularly (every 6 months or as recommended by doctor)

- As lithium may cause dizziness, or drowsiness, you may wish to know how you react to this medicine before you drive, use hazardous machinery or perform other tasks that require alertness.

- Consult your doctor before consuming any alcoholic beverages while taking this medication.

## STORAGE OF MEDICATION

Store away from heat and direct light. Avoid storing in the bathroom medicine cabinet as the heat or moisture may cause the medication to break down.

## **KEEP OUT OF REACH OF CHILDREN**



BC Mental Health &  
Addiction Services

An agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority

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