



Bipolar Disorder - how medication can help

What is Bipolar Disorder?

Bipolar disorder is a mood disorder characterised by recurring episodes of mania and depression. Bipolar Disorder (BD) is a chronic and recurrent illness that usually runs in the family and affects 1% of adult population. Treatment is a combination of medication, psychological and social interventions.

What medications are used in Bipolar Disorder?

A number of medications can be used in treatment and prevention of bipolar disorder: mood stabilisers; antimanic agents; and sometimes antidepressants are used in BD. Long term treatment is strongly recommended because of the recurrent nature of the illness. Mood stabilisers are prescribed to reduce variations in mood and to prevent recurrence of episodes in BD. The most common types of mood stabilisers currently use in Australia are: Lithium, Valproate, Carbamazepine and Lamotrigine. Antipsychotic medications are successfully used in treatment of mania and longer term treatment of BD. Antidepressants may be prescribed for treatment of episodes of severe bipolar depression but are usually used in conjunction with a mood stabiliser. The exact mechanism of action of these medications is unknown but it is thought that they probably balance the neurotransmitters in brain.

Mood stabilisers

Lithium

Lithium has been widely used in treatment of patient with mood disorders for several decades. Lithium is effective in treatment of manic episodes, depressive episodes and is also effective in decreasing the frequency of manic and depressive cycles in bipolar disorder. Studies have also shown that lithium may reduce the risk of suicide. Lithium is a non addictive and non sedative medication but its use must be carefully monitored for possibly dangerous side effects. Blood tests are used to ensure that the lithium blood level is high enough to be effective but low enough to avoid lithium poisoning.

Generic name	Brand name	Common side effects
Lithium carbonate	Lithicarb	Stomach aches Fine hand tremor Increased thirst/urination Worsening psoriasis & acne
Lithium carbonate slow release	Quilonum SR	Weight gain or loss Dry mouth/increased saliva Hair Loss Metallic Taste

What precautions should be taken when you are prescribed lithium?

Side effects of lithium are directly related to how much lithium is in the blood stream. If the lithium

levels become toxic, you may experience disorientation, muscle weakness, drowsiness, coarse tremor, muscle twitching and seizures.

Some degree of thyroid dysfunction (i.e. less thyroid hormone produced) can develop in long term treatment with lithium. It can be easily treated with thyroid replacement hormones.

Lithium is excreted through the kidney. Sodium is also passed through kidney and affects lithium secretion. It is important that you do not go on low salt diets as it reduces lithium secretion and may lead to lithium poisoning. It is important to drink at least 8-12 cups of liquids daily (2.5-3.5 litres) especially during hot weather and during activities to avoid dehydration. Seek advice from your doctor if you are going to take over the counter medication such as anti-inflammatory medications as these can increase lithium levels in the blood.

Lithium and pregnancy

Lithium use during pregnancy has a well known association with the cardiac malformation in the baby. The risk is highest during the first trimester, before many women know that they are pregnant. Generally, lithium should be avoided in pregnancy if possible. Pregnancy should be planned and lithium should be discontinued gradually before conception.

Lithium is excreted in breast milk. Breast feeding while taking lithium is not safe for the baby.

Valproate

Valproate is in a class of medications called anticonvulsants. It is used for treatment of epilepsy, pain and mood disorders. Valproate is used for the acute treatment of mania and as a mood stabiliser. Studies have shown long term treatment with valproate may prevent recurrence of episodes. For some people valproate may work better than lithium. Valproate rarely causes serious damage to liver. Your doctor will check your liver function prior treatment and at regular intervals thereafter.

Generic name	Brand name	Common side effects
Valproate	Epilim	Stomach upset, vomiting, Feeling tired and confused Weight gain, fluid retention Hair loss Increased androgen levels in women Trembling hands

You need to talk to your doctor if these side effects become bothersome as this may require an adjustment in your dosage.

What precautions should be taken when you are prescribed valproate?

You need to discuss with your doctor if you work with operating machinery or driving, combining valproate with other medications, or you are pregnant or wanting to become pregnant.

Pregnancy

Valproate has been reported to cause birth defects when taken by the mother during the first

three months of pregnancy. You need to discuss the risks and benefits of using this medication with your doctor when you plan on becoming pregnant. Valproate passes into the breast milk, but the effect on the nursing baby is not known.

Carbamazepine

Carbamazepine is an anticonvulsant like valproate that can be used as mood stabiliser. It has to reach a given level in the blood to be effective. In order to monitor this you need to have frequent blood tests.

Generic name	Brand name	Common side effects
Carbamazepine	Tegretol	Unsteadiness, Drowsiness, dizziness Headache, nausea Double vision Rash

What precautions should be taken when you are prescribed carbamazepine?

The common side effects can be largely avoided by starting a low dose and increasing the dose slowly. Care should be taken when you are combining with sedative medications, including alcohol and oral contraceptives or lithium. You need to tell your doctor about other medications that you are taking. Carbamazepine can decrease the number of white cells in your body. This can be monitored when you have regular blood tests. Discuss with your doctor if you develop a rash, blisters or fever during your treatment with carbamazepine. Avoid drinking grape fruit juice as it can affect the level of carbamazepine in your blood. Similar to other mood stabilisers you need to tell your doctor if

you are pregnant or planning to become pregnant.

Lamotrigine

Lamotrigine is particularly effective for prevention of depressive symptoms in certain patients with bipolar disorder. In order to prevent depression, it needs to be taken for a long time.

Generic name	Brand name	Common side effects
Lamotrigine	Lamictal	Headache, Dry mouth Constipation Drowsiness, Tremor Unsteadiness, dizziness Blurred vision

What precautions should be taken when you are prescribed lamotrigine?

Lamotrigine may cause serious rashes that in very rare cases can be fatal. The risk can be reduced if you start with small dose and increase it very slowly. Inform your doctor if you have allergies to medications, food or other substances. Please let your doctor know that you are pregnant or planning to become pregnant. If you develop rash or flu symptoms include fever, sore throat or blisters on soles or palms, immediately call your doctor. Care also should be taken in patients with heart and kidney problems.

This brochure contains general information and does not include all possible side effects or all brand names of medications.

SYDNEY SOUTH WEST
AREA HEALTH SERVICE
NSW HEALTH
Mental Health Services