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Drug Information: Lithium

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(lith' ee um)

Brand name(s): Cibalith-S; Eskalith; Eskalith CR; Lithane; Lithobid; Lithonate; Lithotabs

IMPORTANT WARNING:

Keep all appointments with your doctor and the laboratory. Your doctor will order certain lab tests to check your response to lithium.

Why is this medication prescribed?

Lithium is used to treat people with bipolar disorder (extreme mood changes from depression or anger to elation).

This medication is sometimes prescribed for other uses; ask your doctor or pharmacist for more information.

How should this medicine be used?

Lithium comes as a tablet, capsule, extended-release (long-acting) tablet, and liquid to take by mouth. It usually is taken one to four times a day. The amount of lithium you take may need to be adjusted. Follow the directions on your prescription label carefully, and ask your doctor or pharmacist to explain any part you do not understand. Take lithium exactly as directed. Do not take more or less of it or take it more often than prescribed by your doctor.

The extended-release tablet must be swallowed whole; do not crush or chew it.

Continue to take lithium even if you feel well. Do not stop taking lithium without talking to your doctor, especially if you have taken large doses for a long time. Your doctor probably will decrease your dose gradually. This drug must be taken regularly for a few weeks before its full effect is felt.

Other uses for this medicine

Lithium also is used to treat certain blood disorders, cluster headaches, premenstrual tension, bulimia, alcoholism, syndrome of inappropriate secretion of ADH, tardive dyskinesia, hyperthyroidism, postpartum affective psychosis, and corticosteroid-induced psychosis. Talk with your doctor about the possible risks of using this drug for your condition.

What special precautions should I follow?

Before taking lithium,

- tell your doctor and pharmacist if you are allergic to lithium, aspirin, tartrazine (a yellow dye in some processed foods and drugs), or any other drugs.
- tell your doctor and pharmacist what prescription and nonprescription medications you are taking, especially acetazolamide (Diamox), caffeine-containing products, captopril (Capoten), carbamazepine (Tegretol), diuretics ('water pills'), enalapril (Vasotec), fluoxetine (Prozac), haloperidol (Haldol), heart medication, ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin, or Nuprin), iodide salts, lisinopril (Zestril), medication for depression, methyldopa (Aldomet), phenytoin (Dilantin), sodium bicarbonate and other antacids, theophylline (TheoDur), verapamil (Calan), and vitamins.
- tell your doctor if you have or have ever had heart or kidney disease, shock therapy, thyroid disease, dehydration, or low sodium levels.
- tell your doctor if you are pregnant, plan to become pregnant, or are breast-feeding. If you become pregnant while taking lithium, call your doctor.
- if you are having surgery, including dental surgery, tell the doctor or dentist that you are taking lithium.
- you should know that this drug may make you drowsy. Do not drive a car or operate machinery until you know how this drug affects you.
- remember that alcohol can add to the drowsiness caused by this drug.

What special dietary instructions should I follow?

Lithium may cause an upset stomach. Take lithium with food or milk. Drink at least 8-12 glasses of water or another beverage each day (unless your doctor tells you otherwise) and use a moderate amount of salt on your food. However, if your doctor puts you on a low-salt or low-sodium diet, follow it. Avoid drinking beverages with caffeine, such as tea, coffee, cola, or chocolate milk.

What should I do if I forget a dose?

Do not take the missed dose as soon as you remember it. Skip it; then take your next dose at the regularly scheduled time. Do not take a double dose to make up for a missed one.

What side effects can this medication cause?

Side effects from lithium are common. Tell your doctor if any of these symptoms are severe or do not go away:

- drowsiness
- upset stomach
- loss of appetite
- stomach bloating
- stomach pain
- headache
- weight gain

If you experience any of the following symptoms, call your doctor immediately:

- weakness
- tiredness

- fever
- tremor
- confusion
- diarrhea
- unsteady walking
- frequent urination
- vomiting
- flu or cold with fever
- slow, jerky movements
- seizures or convulsions
- fast, irregular, or pounding heartbeat

What storage conditions are needed for this medicine?

Keep this medication in the container it came in, tightly closed, and out of reach of children. Store it at room temperature and away from excess heat and moisture (not in the bathroom). Throw away any medication that is outdated or no longer needed. Talk to your pharmacist about the proper disposal of your medication.

In case of emergency/overdose

In case of overdose, call your local poison control center at 1-800-222-1222. If the victim has collapsed or is not breathing, call local emergency services at 911.

What other information should I know?

Do not let anyone else take your medication. Ask your pharmacist any questions you have about refilling your prescription.

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