



BIPOLAR DISORDER

Bipolar disorder is a chronic psychiatric disorder affecting millions of people worldwide. The impact of this disorder can be devastating, influencing jobs, relationships and overall well-being. Fortunately, there is treatment, part of which involves medications. Medications commonly used to treat the symptoms of bipolar disorder include lithium (Eskalith®), divalproex (Depakote®), carbamazepine (Tegretol®), oxcarbazepine (Trileptal®), lamotrigine (Lamictal®) and topiramate (Topamax®), although various other drugs are also used.

Medications cannot cure bipolar disorder but, rather, are used to help treat the symptoms associated with the disorder. Long-term treatment is usually necessary. Abrupt discontinuation of medications can induce withdrawal or, more importantly, trigger an episode, so it is critical for patients to take their medications every day.

Each drug can act differently from patient to patient, but the right drug or combination can stabilize the patient, decreasing future mood episodes and increasing the quality of day-to-day life, which can be invaluable. Finding the correct dose is also important. Lithium, divalproex and carbamazepine all require blood concentrations to be evaluated to determine the correct dose and to avoid toxicity. Lithium toxicity, in particular, can be very serious.

Many things can increase or decrease lithium concentrations. Dehydration can increase the concentration of lithium in the blood; therefore, it is recommended that patients drink 12 eight-ounce glasses of water each day when taking lithium. It is also important to maintain a consistent diet, especially salt intake. Sodium restriction can increase lithium levels, while excess sodium can decrease lithium levels. Certain drugs, including some over-the-counter medications, can affect lithium levels as well. Regular use of some blood pressure medications (like hydrochlorothiazide and lisinopril) and pain medications (like ibuprofen and naproxen) can

increase lithium levels, while abruptly stopping these drugs can decrease lithium levels. Patients should inform their doctor or pharmacist before starting or stopping any medications. Another factor that can influence the lithium level is exercise. Lithium is excreted in sweat, so excessive sweating can decrease lithium concentrations. On the other hand, if extreme exercise causes dehydration, the lithium level may increase. The key to maintaining an appropriate lithium level is consistency.

A well-known side effect associated with several of these medications is weight gain. Not all patients experience this side effect; however, weight should always be carefully monitored. In the case that a patient has substantial weight gain after starting a medication, it may be advisable to switch to a more weight-neutral drug, such as topiramate or lamotrigine. All patients should maintain a healthy diet and exercise regularly to help counteract this side effect and to help maintain good mental health.

These medications can have multiple drug interactions. One interaction that should not be overlooked is that between several mood stabilizers and oral contraceptives (birth control pills). Carbamazepine, oxcarbazepine and topiramate can increase the metabolism of oral contraceptives, making them less effective. Women who are taking oral contraceptives may need higher doses of them or additional forms of contraception if taking one of these mood stabilizers.

Many different medications are used to treat the symptoms of bipolar disorder. The safe and effective use of these medications involves taking them on a daily basis, maintaining a consistent diet and exercise regimen and informing a doctor or pharmacist of any medication changes. Patients should also speak with their doctor or pharmacist about questions or concerns they have about their medications.

For more information, ask your pharmacist!

This information provided by the Michigan Pharmacists Association and:

