Jeffrey Panko NP
PSYCHIATRY

Jeffrey Panko, PMHNP-BC
Phone 646-549-4694 | Fax 646-558-4238
JMPankoNP@JeffreyPanko.com
jeffreypanko.com

PATIENT EDUCATION

Lithium

Lithium carbonate / Lithium citrate / Immediate- and extended-release formulations

A guide for adults taking lithium.
Follow the directions on your prescription and your provider's recommendations.

KEEP EVERY BLOOD-TEST APPOINTMENT

TOXICITY SYMPTOMS NEED HELP, EVEN WITH A NORMAL LEVEL

Formulations: Carbonate capsules or tablets, extended-release tablets, and citrate liquid have different strengths and schedules. Do not switch brands or formulations without instructions.

What it is used for

Lithium treats mania and helps prevent future episodes of bipolar disorder. It is also used off-label to strengthen antidepressant treatment in some people with depression.

How it works

It affects several signaling pathways inside nerve cells involved in mood regulation. The amount in the bloodstream is important: the range between a useful dose and a toxic dose is relatively narrow.

What to expect over time

Mania can improve over days to weeks, while maintenance benefit is assessed over a longer period. Dose changes are guided by symptoms, side effects, and properly timed blood levels.

Taking your medication

- Take consistently, with food or milk if needed for nausea. Swallow ER tablets whole.
- Keep fluid and salt intake reasonably steady. Avoid dehydration and sudden low-salt diets.
- Do not double a missed dose; follow the missed-dose instructions for your schedule.
- Tell your provider promptly about vomiting, diarrhea, fever, heavy sweating, or inability to drink normally.

Jeffrey Panko NP
PSYCHIATRY

Jeffrey Panko, PMHNP-BC
Phone 646-549-4694 | Fax 646-558-4238
JMPankoNP@JeffreyPanko.com
jeffreypanko.com

LITHIUM / 02

Side effects and safety

Possible side effects

- Fine hand tremor
- Thirst or increased urination
- Mild nausea or loose stools
- Weight change, acne, or thyroid changes

Keeping track of treatment

Some side effects resolve with time; others may require a change of medication. Discuss persistent or bothersome side effects with your provider.

Lithium levels, kidney function, thyroid function, and calcium are monitored. Levels are commonly drawn about 12 hours after the last dose; follow your provider's exact timing instructions.

Additional levels may be needed after dose changes, illness, dehydration, or interacting medicines. A new coarse tremor or unsteady walking should not be dismissed as an ordinary side effect.

If you take too much

For a suspected overdose, call Poison Control at **1-800-222-1222** immediately, even if you feel well. Call 911 for a seizure, collapse, trouble breathing, or inability to wake.

Before you start

Discuss kidney or heart disease, thyroid problems, abnormal calcium, dehydration risk, and all medicines. Pregnancy requires individualized planning because lithium can affect the developing baby and dosing changes during pregnancy and after delivery. Discuss breastfeeding with your provider.

Medicines and interactions

Review all your medications with your provider, including over-the-counter medicines and supplements. Have new medications checked before taking them.

NSAIDs such as ibuprofen or naproxen, ACE inhibitors, ARBs, and some diuretics can raise lithium levels. Check before starting or stopping them.

Changes in salt, fluids, or caffeine can alter levels. Other serotonergic or antipsychotic medicines may add toxicity risks and require review.

Jeffrey Panko NP
PSYCHIATRY

Jeffrey Panko, PMHNP-BC
Phone 646-549-4694 | Fax 646-558-4238
JMPankoNP@JeffreyPanko.com
jeffreypanko.com

LITHIUM / 03

Living with your treatment

When to get help

Emergency symptoms. Hold lithium and obtain urgent medical assessment for vomiting or diarrhea with worsening tremor, unsteady walking, slurred speech, confusion, or marked drowsiness. Call 911 for a seizure, collapse, or inability to wake.

Prompt medical advice. Contact your provider promptly during dehydrating illness or for very little urine, persistent excessive thirst, a new coarse tremor, or significant weakness. Do not wait for the next routine blood test.

If you feel unsafe or have thoughts of self-harm, call 911 or go to an emergency department.

Your questions answered

Why does a blood-draw time matter?
Lithium levels change after a dose. A consistently timed sample helps your provider compare results and avoid an inappropriate dose change.

Can I stop when I feel stable?
Consult with your provider. Gradual changes help reduce relapse risk; suspected toxicity is different and needs urgent assessment.

Everyday tips

Keep your laboratory schedule and an updated medication list.

Plan for hot weather, exercise, and illness without making large changes in salt or fluid intake on your own.

Storage and safety

Keep medication in its labeled container, away from excess heat and moisture and out of reach of children and pets. Do not share it. Ask a pharmacy about disposal of unused medication.

Sources

MedlinePlus: Lithium
DailyMed: Lithium Medication Guide

Educational handout; does not replace your prescription or provider's recommendations.