

# Safer Lithium Therapy

## Information for Healthcare Professionals

### Signs of Lithium Toxicity

Like all medicines at normal doses lithium can cause side effects in some patients e.g. fine tremor, gastric disturbance, weight gain, metallic taste. Lithium toxicity occurs when blood lithium levels exceed therapeutic levels. Symptoms of toxicity increase in severity with increasing blood levels and can be dangerous and possibly fatal.

Lithium levels need close monitoring to ensure safe and effective therapy. If a person on lithium starts to experience any of the symptoms below, it is ESSENTIAL they are referred to a DOCTOR IMMEDIATELY for lithium levels to be reviewed.

#### Early signs of lithium toxicity:

- Dehydration
- Lack of appetite
- Diarrhoea
- Vomiting
- Blurred vision

#### Moderately severe lithium toxicity:

- A marked tremor
- Unsteadiness
- Slurred speech
- Drowsiness
- Confusion

#### Severe lithium toxicity:

- Muscles twitches
- Very severe drowsiness and confusion
- Fits
- Unconsciousness

Any factors that can cause dehydration such as diarrhoea, vomiting, big changes in salt intake and excess sweating can increase the level of lithium in the blood and increase risk of toxicity.

#### Routine Lithium Monitoring

- Every 3 months for the first year
- Every 6 month thereafter **IF STABLE**
- Every 3 months for at risk groups (the elderly, those taking interacting drugs)
- 6 monthly thyroid and renal function tests
- Yearly weight and body mass index

More frequent monitoring if evidence of deterioration

Document result in the patient's medical notes & in th patient's purple lithium therapy book.

#### Safer Use of Lithium

Ensure blood levels are between 0.4-1.0mmol/l. Toxicity usually occurs at >1.5mmol/l. This can be lower in the elderly. Monitor for this and treat the clinical symptoms accordingly.

- Check for interactions whenever medicines are changed, including over the counter medications.
- Ensure regular renal, thyroid and parathyroid function tests are completed
- Always prescribe the same brand of lithium due to differences in bioavailability
- For women of childbearing age, discuss contraception & importance of planning pregnancies

**Remember: Lithium levels should be taken 12 hours post dose**

For more information on Prescribing and monitoring of lithium please Visit:  
[http://trustnet.cnl.nhs.uk/Documents/Lithium\\_Therapy\\_SOP.pdf](http://trustnet.cnl.nhs.uk/Documents/Lithium_Therapy_SOP.pdf)

