

Understanding Mood-Stabilizing Medications

Mood-stabilizing medications are primarily used to treat the symptoms of bipolar disorder, including mania and depression, but they may also be used to treat other disorders, such as schizoaffective disorder. Several mood-stabilizing medications have been discovered over the past century, including lithium (the 1940s), carbamazepine and valproic acid (1970s and 1980s), and olanzapine (2000).

Mood-stabilizing medications are effective in reducing episodes of mania and depression. They are used to treat bipolar disorder (and sometimes other disorders).

FACTS ABOUT MOOD-STABILIZING MEDICATIONS

- Mood-stabilizing medications are believed to work by affecting levels of neurotransmitters (chemicals in the brain).
- The medications are taken by mouth.
- They are not addictive.
- The medications may work in a few days; but they usually require several weeks to become completely effective.
- Mood-stabilizing medications can affect other symptoms, such as impulsiveness, agitation, hallucinations, delusions, and anxiety.
- Taking these medications has two main effects:
 - They reduce the severity of symptoms.
 - They lower the chances of symptom relapses in the future.
- If symptom relapses occur, a temporary increase in mood-stabilizing medication dosage may be helpful.

Mood stabilizers affect certain neurotransmitters in the brain.

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TYPES OF MOOD STABILIZERS

There are three broad categories of mood-stabilizing medications: lithium, anticonvulsants (medications originally used to treat seizure disorders), and antipsychotics. See the following table.

Mood Stabilizers		
Type of drug/brand name	Chemical name	Side effects
<i>Lithium</i>		
Eskalith, Eskalith Controlled Release, Lithobid, Lithonate	<i>Lithium carbonate</i>	<i>Common side effects</i> Nausea, weight gain, slowed thinking, fatigue, tremor <i>Serious side effects</i> Vomiting, diarrhea, slurred speech, confusion
<i>Anticonvulsants</i>		
Depakote, Depakene Tegretol	Valproic acid Carbamazepine	<i>Common side effects</i> Fatigue, weight gain, nausea, headache, decreased sexual desire <i>Serious side effects</i> Confusion, vomiting, abdominal pain, vision problems, fever, jaundice or liver damage, abnormal bleeding or bruising, blood cell count abnormalities, swelling lymph glands
<i>Antipsychotics</i>		
Zyprexa Clozaril	Olanzapine Clozapine	<i>Side effects</i> See "Understanding Antipsychotic Medications" handout

There are three categories of mood stabilizers:

- Lithium
- Anticonvulsants
- Antipsychotics

SPECIAL ISSUES WITH LITHIUM

If any of the serious side effects are experienced, clients should contact their doctor. High doses of lithium can be harmful to the brain; therefore, regular blood levels of lithium are routinely checked when someone is taking lithium. Low-salt diets and diuretic medications should be avoided, as they lower lithium levels. Anti-inflammatory drugs may increase lithium levels.

Consult a physician if lithium causes side effects.

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SPECIAL ISSUES WITH ANTICONVULSANTS

Again, if any of the serious side effects are experienced, clients should contact their doctor. Anticonvulsants can be sedating, and alcohol may increase this sedation, so people using these medications should be careful when driving or operating machinery. Routine blood levels are conducted in order to monitor how the medication is affecting blood cells and the liver.

Consult a physician if anticonvulsant medications cause side effects.