

A brief guide on mood stabilizers

There are several medications used as mood stabilizers in the treatment of bipolar disorder. The choice of a particular medication in a specific patient depends on the illness profile of the patient and the side effect profile of the medication.

Lithium Carbonate (Camcolit, Eskalith)

Lithium carbonate is effective in the treatment of bipolar mania, and for maintenance treatment of bipolar depression. In particular, studies have shown that patients treated with lithium carbonate for bipolar disorder had lower risks of suicide and aggression. Lithium carbonate needs to be taken consistently for sustained benefits. More importantly, it is important to adhere to the prescribed dose, as lithium can be toxic even in small overdoses.

Common side effects

- Weight gain
- Fine tremor
- Gastrointestinal disturbances, e.g. nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite
- Frequent urination with persistent thirst
- Confusion

Precaution

- Routine monitoring of lithium level in the blood is required because lithium can affect kidney function and thyroid function, and can also cause severe toxicity when the blood level is too high.
- Care should be taken to remain adequately hydrated, as dehydration (e.g. after diarrhoea or when severely ill) can cause the serum concentration of lithium to rise to toxic levels.

Sodium Valproate (Epilim), Sodium Valproate Chrono (Epilim Chrono)

Sodium valproate has demonstrated efficacy as a mood stabilizer for bipolar disorder. Some studies have suggested that it may be more effective than other mood stabilizers for managing bipolar disorder with mixed (manic and depressive) episodes, as well as in bipolar disorder with rapid cycling between manic and depressive episodes. This medication is also used to reduce impulsivity and affective instability in other conditions.

Common side effects

- Weight gain
- Sedation, dizziness
- Gastrointestinal disturbances, e.g. nausea, vomiting
- Hair loss

- Swelling in hands or feet

Precaution

- This medication should be used with care in women of child-bearing age. Apart from the more common side effects above, it has been associated with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome, a condition that disrupts reproductive hormones and fat metabolism that cause problems such as infertility, male-pattern hair distribution, obesity, and diabetes mellitus.
- Women on the medication who plan to conceive should inform their psychiatrists before trying for a baby, as sodium valproate is associated with spinal defects in the unborn foetus. . Pregnant mothers on the medication should also follow up regularly with an Obstetrician to closely monitor the development of the foetus.
- As the medication can cause drowsiness, care should be taken when driving or operating machinery. The drowsiness is worse when taken with other sedative substances, such as other sedative medications and alcohol.

Carbamazepine (Tegretol)

Carbamazepine is an alternative medication for treatment of bipolar disorder. It tends to be used when either or both lithium and valproate are ineffective or unsuitable. In the local setting there is a gene variant, known to be more prevalent amongst Asians, which predisposes to severe skin reactions. Prior to initiation of Carbamazepine, patients are thus often required to undergo a blood test for the relevant gene variant.

Side Effects

- Drowsiness, sedation
- Blurring of vision, double vision
- Gastrointestinal disturbances, e.g. nausea, vomiting
- Constipation or diarrhoea
- Dizziness, headache
- Difficulties with motor coordination (in toxicity)
- Skin reactions ranging from rash to severe skin conditions with significant peeling

Precaution

- This medication is used with caution in the local population as it can predispose to severe skin reactions, and Asians are more susceptible.
- As the medication can cause drowsiness, care should be taken when driving or operating machinery. The drowsiness is worse when carbamazepine is taken with other sedative substances, such as other sedative medications and alcohol.

Second-generation (Atypical) Antipsychotics

Second-generation antipsychotic medications are effective in the management of acute mania and in maintenance treatment for bipolar disorder. Please refer to the article on Antipsychotic Medications for more information.

Concurrent use of alcohol and/or traditional Chinese medications with the medications listed above can lead to erratic absorption, which would make their effects difficult to predict.

The information provided serves as psycho-education and not a guide for self-medication. The information contained herein is not intended to cover all possible uses, directions, precautions, warnings, drug interactions, allergic reactions, or adverse effects. Please consult your psychiatrist before taking any medication.



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