

Lithium therapy – National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) alert

Lithium has long been an important treatment option in bipolar disorder since its discovery fifty years ago. Its therapeutic benefits are now well proven in bipolar; however it has some special risks that need to be managed properly by your doctor and yourself. In December 2009 the National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) issued an alert to all doctors in the UK warning them of the dangers of not prescribing and monitoring lithium properly. Unnecessary side effects and problems have occurred as a result of inadequate monitoring of lithium therapy.

How lithium is prescribed and monitored is laid down clearly for doctors in the NICE guidelines. Your doctor and hospital should have a proper system of monitoring lithium levels and communicating between GPs, psychiatrists, other professionals and the biochemistry lab that analyses the blood test. In some areas there are lithium registers to co-ordinate this activity and alert doctors and patients to unexpected lithium levels.

When you are prescribed lithium your doctor should have spent time discussing in detail the benefits and risks of lithium. You should have been given information sheets with references such as internet links to more information. You should have had an ECG heart trace. You should also have a record book or some means of knowing what your lithium level and other blood results are and have been. Your dispensing pharmacist should know you are on lithium so that you can avoid drugs that interact with lithium, such as common pain killers like ibuprofen (Nurofen®).

Why do we monitor lithium levels? It is important that the dose of lithium is just right and this is different for everybody. If the dose is too low you will not experience its beneficial effects. If the dose is too high you will have unnecessary side effects. As doctors we measure the level of the dose by measuring the level of lithium in your blood. Your blood should be taken every 6 months (as per standard NICE guidelines) to check the lithium level and your kidney and thyroid function/antibodies. This may be done more frequently by some doctors.

All of this information, including the leaflets and monitoring book your doctor should provide you with can be downloaded for free in both English and Welsh at the NPSA website address:

<http://www.nrls.npsa.nhs.uk/resources/type/alerts/?entryid45=65426>

Other web resources:

NICE. <http://guidance.nice.org.uk/CG38>

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