

Nottinghamshire Health Community Algorithm for Prescribing and Monitoring Lithium within Primary and Secondary Care (Mental Health)

Traffic Light Classification - Amber 2
Information sheet for Primary Care Healthcare Professionals

Lithium initiated by Secondary Care (Mental Health) *Prescribe by Brand Name (usually Priadel)*

Indications include: mania, prophylaxis of bipolar disorder, treatment-resistant depression
Check patient has been given a copy of the NPSA Lithium Therapy Information Pack⁵

Monitoring Required (Secondary Care (Mental Health))

Baseline

eGFR, LFTs, thyroid function (TSH) tests, calcium, bodyweight, height. Assess physical health, especially metabolic status (fasting blood glucose, HbA1c, lipid profile) and cardiac function (pulse, blood pressure and **ECG if indicated**). Full blood count, if indicated. Exclude pregnancy. Discuss effective contraception, if relevant.

Lithium serum levels: check 7 days after initiation and repeat weekly until stable (sample to be taken 12 or 24 hours post dose, prior to the next one). Once stable, monitor levels every 3 months. Re-check levels 7 days after dose changes.

Patients with bipolar disorder should be advised that erratic compliance / rapid discontinuation of lithium may increase the risk of relapse.



3-6 months, after initiation, once lithium levels have been stabilised and in line with 'Criteria for Transferring to Primary Care'

Transfer to Primary Care

The psychiatrist will send the GP a copy of this guideline and a copy of the patients' care plan including diagnosis, current test results, list of concomitant medication and professional healthcare contact details. The brand, form, strength, and dosage of lithium must be clearly stated in any correspondence.

To ensure both the GP and psychiatrist receive a copy of any blood test results the name and address of both parties should be specified on the sample forms.

Monitoring Required (Primary Care)

Check lithium serum levels every 3 months
(more frequently if patient is physically unwell, taking interacting medications)

Check eGFR, TSH, calcium, weight every 6 months (more frequently, if clinically indicated).
Check FBC and assess cardiac function if clinically indicated.

An annual health check up should also include blood (plasma) glucose, lipid profile, cardiovascular, diet, level of physical activity, smoking/alcohol, and contraceptive advice (if relevant).

Lithium doses may need to be altered to maintain a level within the range 0.4-1.0mmol/l (based on sample taken 12-18 hours post dose). Individual patients may have a narrower target level within this range (refer to guideline). Re-check levels 7 days after dose changes.

If lithium toxicity suspected or level >1.5mmol/l – STOP lithium immediately and assess patient. Repeat serum lithium, U&Es and creatinine levels and seek hospital advice. Levels >2.0mmol/l consider referral to A&E.



Circumstances in which patients may be referred back to secondary care or secondary care (mental health) advice sought:

- Problematic side-effects, including signs of toxicity (ataxia, tremor, cognitive impairment)
- Deteriorating renal, thyroid function or hypercalcaemia
- Deterioration of mental state, or where level of risk to self or others is increased
- Pregnancy
- Erratic/non-compliance or patient request to discontinue lithium
- Advice on drug interactions
- To consider the appropriateness of continuing lithium beyond 2-5 years of treatment

**Nottinghamshire Health Community Guidelines for the Prescribing and
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Lithium within Primary and Secondary Care (Mental Health)**

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Introduction

Lithium has been classified as an 'Amber 2' drug on the Nottinghamshire APC traffic lights drug list. As such, lithium must be initiated by psychiatrists in secondary care (for all indications), and then once treatment is stabilised (after a period of 3-6 months), prescribing and monitoring responsibilities may be transferred to primary care, in line with this guidance.

Licensed Indications

1. The management of acute manic or hypomanic episodes[#].
2. Prophylaxis of bipolar disorders[#].
3. The management of episodes of recurrent or resistant depressive disorders where treatment with other antidepressants has been unsuccessful.
4. Control of aggressive behaviour or intentional self harm.

Place in Therapy

Lithium is the most effective long-term treatment for bipolar disorder¹. It reduces the frequency, duration and severity of bipolar disorder relapses, and reduces suicidal acts, suicide and overall mortality. Poor adherence or abrupt discontinuation of lithium may increase the risk of relapse.

The decision to give prophylactic lithium is based on a careful consideration of the potential benefits weighed against the likelihood of illness recurrence, patient compliance, and the risks in the individual patient, including physical risk factors. Lithium should only be offered to patients with bipolar disorder, who are motivated to take it regularly for at least one year, otherwise the benefits of taking it may be outweighed by the costs of an increased relapse rate on abrupt discontinuation.

Lithium augmentation (the addition of lithium to antidepressant treatment) is a treatment option for patients whose depression has failed to respond to several antidepressants (NICE CG 90/91)^{2,3}.

The need for continued therapy should be assessed regularly and only continued if benefit persists. The decision to discontinue lithium should be taken jointly by the patient and the specialist. Symptoms, mood and mental state should be actively monitored for 2 years after medication has been stopped (this may be undertaken in primary care)¹.

Other medicines used in bipolar disorder include antipsychotics, valproate and lamotrigine. There are [NAPC Amber 2 prescribing guidelines](#) for atypical antipsychotics and lamotrigine.

Dose and Lithium Levels

The initial dose of lithium (as the carbonate salt) is usually Priadel 600-800mg at night (200-400mg in the frail or elderly). Doses are adjusted according to patient response and serum lithium level results.

The aim is to maintain serum lithium levels between 0.6 and 0.8mmol/l in those being prescribed lithium for the first time. Some patients need a higher lithium level to gain control of their symptoms than others. This decision should be made by the specialist.

For those who have relapsed previously whilst taking lithium, or who still have symptoms with functional impairment whilst receiving lithium, a trial of at least 6 months with serum lithium levels between 0.8 and 1.0mmol/l should be considered¹.

Levels at the lower end of the therapeutic range are recommended for older people and those with risk factors such as heart disease, renal impairment, and those taking interacting concomitant medications.

Lithium levels of 1.0mmol/l may be required for the successful treatment of treatment-resistant depression.

Different preparations of lithium are not bioequivalent. **Once stabilised the patient must be kept on the same brand and formulation.** Lithium should be prescribed by brand name (normally **Priadel**). Lithium liquid is better prescribed twice daily whereas all modified-release tablets can be taken once daily, preferably at bedtime.

Lithium levels should be checked 7 days after any change in brand or formulation. Particular care needs to be taken if changing from a lithium carbonate to a lithium citrate preparation to ensure that the **molar dose** (mmol lithium) remains the same. For example: Priadel 200mg tablets contain lithium carbonate 200mg or **5.4mmol lithium/tablet**; and Li-Liquid 509mg/5ml contains lithium citrate 509mg/5ml or **5.4mmol lithium/5ml** (see BNF).

If a decision is made to discontinue lithium it should be done gradually over at least 4 weeks, preferably up to 3 months. Specialist advice should be sought before stopping lithium.

Contra-indications

Severe kidney disease, serious heart disease, Addison's disease and untreated hypothyroidism are all **relative** contra-indications to lithium. Specialist advice should always be sought.

Monitoring (see Algorithm)

It is important to note that the toxic effects of lithium may appear before symptoms of acute toxicity, renal or thyroid disease.

An abnormal estimated Glomerular Filtration Rate (eGFR) i.e. below 60ml/min is often found in patients taking lithium, and is not indicative of renal damage, unless there is a fall of >4ml/min per year. Thus it is important to monitor serial eGFRs⁴. If the eGFR falls over 2 or more tests then lithium levels should be monitored more frequently.

Patients with a declining eGFR over time (below 60ml/min), or any eGFR below 30ml/min without acute dehydration, require further assessment for proteinuria, haematuria and cardiovascular status, and referral to a renal specialist⁴.

Please note eGFR is not accurate in those aged below 18 years, or above 70 years, and an adjusted formula is required for patients of Afro-Caribbean origin.

With regards to thyroid function, a raised TSH, with normal free T3 or T4, may be clinically important, as it is often associated with worsening control of mood symptoms. A reduction in the lithium dose, or the addition of levothyroxine may be indicated after consultation with a psychiatrist⁴.

ECG monitoring should be considered in people at high risk of cardiovascular disease.

An annual physical health check up should include a review of all test results and focus on blood (plasma) glucose, lipid profile, cardiovascular status, BP, weight, diet, nutritional status, level of physical activity, smoking/alcohol and contraceptive advice (if relevant).

Adverse Effects

Adverse effects that occur early on in treatment and are generally minor and transient. They include nausea, loose stools, dyspepsia, metallic taste, fine hand tremor, polyuria, and polydipsia.

Please note that with regards to polyuria and polydipsia, these are important symptoms that may indicate the development of nephrogenic diabetes insipidus, so tests of urine osmolality are indicated³.

Long-term adverse effects include weight gain. A small percentage of patients (exact incidence is unknown, women are at greater risk) develop hypothyroidism and/or goitre (see above).

Other adverse effects are hyperparathyroidism and hypercalcaemia (hence rationale for 6-monthly calcium level checks), oedema and leucocytosis,

Please note that side-effects can often be relieved by a slight reduction in dose.

Signs of Lithium Toxicity

Neurotoxicity can occur with a normal lithium level however signs suggestive of lithium toxicity include severe diarrhoea, vomiting or anorexia, coarse hand tremor, muscle twitching, dehydration, drowsiness, confusion, cognitive impairment, muscle weakness, slurred speech, ataxia, paraesthesia, nystagmus, vertigo, tinnitus, restlessness, and blurred vision. Patients may look ashen/grey.

Severe poisoning (level >2.0mmol/l) is associated with convulsions, renal failure, electrolyte imbalance, hypotension and clouding of consciousness. Coma and death may occur.

Management of Lithium Toxicity

In cases of suspected lithium toxicity consider referral to hospital. Stop lithium and take an urgent serum lithium level, U&Es and creatinine. Administration of fluids and sodium will help to bring the lithium level down. There may be a delay of 1-2 days before maximum toxicity occurs so check the lithium level again after 24 hours. Once the underlying cause of the toxicity has been established lithium can usually be restarted at a lower dose.

Patients with a level over 2.0mmol/l are likely to show signs of serious toxicity and urgent hospital advice should always be sought. Treatment is supportive with special regard to electrolyte balance, renal function and control of convulsions. Dialysis may be necessary.

Preventing Lithium Toxicity

In order to avoid developing lithium toxicity, patients should be encouraged to maintain a good intake of fluids and to avoid sudden changes in dietary salt intake (e.g. low salt diet, slimming diet), as lack of salt can result in lithium toxicity. Other circumstances predisposing to lithium toxicity include febrile illness, sweating (e.g. hot weather, after exercise), vomiting, diarrhoea and certain drug interactions. Patients should be regularly reminded of the causes and signs of lithium toxicity and what to do if toxicity is suspected. This information is covered in the NPSA Lithium Therapy Information Pack⁵ given to patients at the start of treatment.

Drug Interactions with Lithium

Diuretics (particularly thiazide)	-	All may cause lithium toxicity
NSAIDs (including COX-2 selective inhibitors)	-	as they reduce renal excretion
ACEIs (including Angiotensin II Antagonists)	-	of lithium. Serum lithium levels
Metronidazole, tetracyclines		can be increased by up to 60%.

Patients should be advised not to take over-the-counter NSAID analgesics such as ibuprofen (e.g. Nurofen, Advil, Cuprofen). Paracetamol and aspirin are safe alternatives.

The use of products containing significant amounts of sodium as chloride or bicarbonate (e.g. some antacids, urinary alkalinisers and effervescent analgesics) can lower previously stable lithium levels and should be used under medical supervision.

If interacting drugs are co-prescribed they should be prescribed on a regular rather than PRN basis. Check lithium levels more frequently and adjust the lithium dose accordingly. Other drug interactions are listed in the BNF/eBNF.

Pregnancy and breast-feeding

Women of child-bearing age should be strongly advised to use a robust method of contraception. Lithium is associated with an increased risk of fetal abnormalities (e.g. fetal heart defects, Ebstein's anomaly).

Should pregnancy occur whilst taking lithium, the GP should immediately inform the psychiatrist looking after the patient. In addition, it is good practice to involve the Perinatal Psychiatry Team and specialists in Feto-Maternal Medicine early as the patient will need access to specialised services in pregnancy and post-partum.

Most patients will wish to have early ultrasound scans to look for foetal anomalies, and as many will choose to continue with their pregnancies, they will require frequent monitoring by Psychiatry and Obstetric Services to ensure there are adequate reviews and treatment plans with regards to their medication and follow-up antenatally, peri- and post-partum.

Lithium is excreted into breast milk so breast-feeding is not advised. Further information can be obtained from the Perinatal Psychiatry Team based at QMC (Tel: 0115-9709339).

Cost of Treatment (28 days)

Priadel brand – lithium carbonate modified-release tablets 400mg-800mg/day, **£1.55-£2.25** (Drug Tariff October 2018)

CRITERIA FOR TRANSFERRING CARE TO PRIMARY CARE/GP

- **The patient is tolerating and taking a maintenance dose of lithium.**
- **Suitable support arrangements for community care are in place.**
- **An agreed care plan is in place with respect to monitoring the patients' mental and physical health, assessing the effects and side-effects of medication, and actions required if the patient shows signs of relapse or lithium toxicity.**
- **It should be clearly documented in correspondence who will be responsible for prescribing and carrying out routine monitoring tests and who will be acting upon the results of these tests.**
- **The Psychiatrist and GP responsibilities are outlined on the next page.**

PSYCHIATRIST RESPONSIBILITIES

- To assess the patient, establish the diagnosis, determine a management strategy and devise a care plan in conjunction with the GP, other healthcare professionals and appropriate support agencies.
- To initiate lithium, monitor response, assess/manage initial side-effects.
- To provide written information about the illness and lithium treatment. This will include provision of an individualised NPSA Lithium Therapy Information Pack⁵, with Record Book updated when necessary.
- To provide the GP with a copy of the agreed care plan and these guidelines.
- The care plan should state who is responsible for undertaking and acting on the results of lithium levels, eGFR, TSH, calcium and bodyweight taken at the appropriate time intervals.
- To be available for advice and agree an action plan if the GP reports signs of relapse, side-effects, unexpected blood results, compliance problems or level of risk to self or others is increased.
- To have procedures in place for rapid referral by the GP where appropriate.
- To prescribe lithium for at least 3-6 months until the GP agrees to take over care.
- To notify the GP as soon as practical of any test results and changes to drug treatment or care plan.
- To ensure the GP and psychiatrist receive a copy of any blood test results from Pathology, the name and address of BOTH parties should be specified on the blood sample forms.
- To advise on dose adjustments and when, and how to stop lithium.
- To discharge the patient when appropriate, following agreement with the GP.

GP RESPONSIBILITIES

- To check that the patient has had the necessary blood tests and to interpret the results, seeking advice where necessary. It would be sensible to not routinely issue repeat prescriptions for lithium without first confirming that appropriate tests have been carried out at the suggested intervals.
- To check the patient's copy of the NPSA Lithium Therapy Record Book⁵ and update this when necessary.
- To monitor at regular intervals the mental health, general health and well being of the patient, assess compliance, adjust dose, monitor and manage adverse effects, in liaison with the psychiatrist if necessary.
- When prescribing lithium to specify the brand, form, strength and dose.
- To notify the psychiatrist as soon as practical of any test results or changes to drug treatment, if appropriate.
- To ensure the GP and psychiatrist receive a copy of any blood test results from Pathology, the name and address of BOTH parties should be specified on the blood sample forms.
- To place patient on the practice SMI (Severe Mental Illness) register and undertake an annual health check focusing on cardiovascular disease, diabetes, obesity, respiratory disease and level of physical activity.

PHARMACIST RESPONSIBILITIES

- **Pharmacy staff will follow an agreed standard operating procedure (SOP) for supplying lithium, as recommended in the NPSA Patient Safety Alert⁵.**
- **As a principle, lithium therapy will not be withheld unless professional judgement prevails.**
- **Pharmacy staff will not dispense a prescription for lithium without first confirming the brand and formulation required, checking for lithium-drug interactions and asking to see the patient's Lithium Therapy Record Book to check if relevant blood tests have been taken.**
- **Where pharmacy staff identify that the patients Record Book needs updating (or replacing) the patient will be asked to raise this with their prescriber.**
- **The pharmacist will contact the prescriber to discuss or highlight any clinically relevant issues which make lithium therapy safer.**

PATIENT RESPONSIBILITIES

- **Your doctor will give you an Information Pack on lithium therapy when you first start taking lithium. This will be completed with basic information about you and your lithium treatment. The Record Book will be used to record the results of your blood tests (e.g. lithium blood level, kidney checks, thyroid checks and weight), and when your next blood tests are due.**
- **Keep this information in a safe place.**
- **Take your Record Book with you each time you see your GP, attend a clinic, visit a community pharmacy, request a new prescription or have a prescription dispensed.**
- **If you misplace your Information Booklet or Record Book please ask your doctor for another one.**

References

1. NICE Clinical Guideline 185 (September 2014). Bipolar Disorder: Assessment and Management www.guidance.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg185
2. NICE Clinical Guideline 90 (October 2009). Depression in adults: recognition and Management. <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg90>
3. NICE Clinical Guideline 91 (October 2009). Depression in adults with a chronic physical health problem: recognition and management. <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg91>
4. Personal communication with Professor Richard Morriss, Professor of Psychiatry and Community Health, University of Nottingham (November 2015).
5. NPSA Patient Safety Alert. Safer Lithium Therapy (NPSA 2009/PSA005) issued 1 December 2009. Includes Lithium Therapy Patient Information Pack. Available at: www.nrls.npsa.nhs.uk/alerts

For further information, please refer to the current British National Formulary and SPC.

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