

Facts About Mood Stabilizers

Introduction

Mood stabilizing medications are a group of drugs used to treat disturbances in mood, including mania and depression. The most widely used mood stabilizing drug is lithium.

The clinical effects of lithium were discovered in the 1940s, and it has since become a widely used medication. The clinical properties of other mood stabilizers (carbamazepine, valproic acid) were discovered in the 1970s and 1980s. These medications do not “cure” mood swings, but they often provide significant relief from any symptoms.

The Clinical Effects of Mood-Stabilizing Medications

Mood stabilizing drugs are most often used to treat the symptoms of bipolar disorder (manic-depression), although persons with other illnesses such as schizoaffective disorder, may also benefit from them. There are three major uses for mood stabilizing medications:

1. Reducing acute (severe) symptoms of mania or depression to a more manageable level
2. Stabilizing mood swings
3. Preventing symptom relapses and rehospitalizations

Reducing Acute Symptoms and Stabilizing Mood Swings

When a person has severe symptoms of mania or depression, mood stabilizing medications can be given. The medications stabilize mood and reduce associated symptoms, such as agitation, sleep problems, hallucinations, and delusions. If the person has already been receiving these drugs, the dosage may be increased. These medications must usually be taken for several weeks before significant clinical effects occur. Other medications (such as antipsychotics) are sometimes given in addition to mood stabilizers for a temporary period of time.

Preventing Symptom Relapses

Even after symptoms have been controlled by mood stabilizers, these medications can prevent future relapses and rehospitalizations for persons with bipolar and schizoaffective disorder.

Types of Mood Stabilizers

There are three broad types of mood stabilizing medication, lithium, anticonvulsants (medications originally developed for the treatment of seizure disorders), and antipsychotic medications. The specific medications and their side-effects are summarized in the chart below.

MOOD STABILIZERS		
TYPE OF DRUG	CHEMICAL NAME	SIDE EFFECTS
LITHIUM	Lithium Carbonate	Common Side Effects
Eskalith		Nausea
Eskalith Controlled Release		Weight gain, Slowed thinking
Lithobid		Fatigue
Lithonate		Tremor
		Serious Side Effects
		Vomiting
		Diarrhea
		Slurred speech
		Confusion
ANTICONVULSANTS	CHEMICAL NAME	Common Side Effects
Tegretol	Carbamezepine	Fatigue
Depakote, Depakene	Valproic acid	Weight gain
Lomictal	Lomotrigine	Nausea
Neurontin	Gabpentin	Headache
Topamax	Topiramate	Decreased sexual desire
		Serious Side Effects
		Confusion
		Vomiting
		Abdominal pain
		Vision problems
		Fever
		Jaundice or liver damage

		Abnormal bleeding or bruising Blood count abnormalities
		Swelling lymph glands
ANTIPSYCHOTICS	Chemical Name	Side Effects
Zyprexa	Olanzapine	See Facts about Antipsychotic Medications at https://www.mirecc.va.gov/visn22/Facts_about_Antipsychotic_Medications_Veteran_and_Family_Handout.pdf
Clozaril	Clozapine	
Risperdal	Risperidone	

Lithium

Lithium is one of many chemical elements, like oxygen or copper, that occurs in nature. Lithium is highly reactive and combines easily with other elements and compounds. For this reason, lithium is rarely found in its pure state, but exists in compounds with other elements. When lithium is given as medication, it is combined with oxygen and carbon to form lithium carbonate.

Side Effects of Lithium

Many people experience few or no side effects from lithium. Some side effects are temporary and go away after a period of several weeks or months. Some of these side effects include: nausea, stomach cramps, thirst, fatigue, headache, and mild tremor. If any of these side effects is severe, the person should consult the physician.

Other side effects may be more serious and should be reported to the physician immediately. These side effects include: vomiting, diarrhea, extreme thirst, muscle twitching, slurred speech, confusion, dizziness, or stupor.

Precautions When Taking Lithium

Lithium can be harmful to the kidneys and other organs if taken in too high a dosage. In order to prevent this, the physician must monitor the amount of lithium in the person's body by taking regular blood tests.

Other precautions are also necessary when taking lithium. The body requires sodium to effectively excrete lithium. If the amount of sodium in the body is too low, lithium can build up to a dangerously high level. Because sodium is contained in table salt, a low-salt diet should be avoided (unless prescribed and coordinated by a physician). In addition, prescription and over-the-counter diuretic medications (such as Fluidex with Pamabrom, Aqua-Ban, Tri-Aqua, Aqua-Rid) can lower sodium levels and should be taken only after consultation with a physician. Also, anti-inflammatory drugs (such as ibuprofen) should be taken only under a physician's recommendation. If these precautions are followed, lithium is usually a very safe medication.

Anticonvulsant Medications

Anticonvulsant medications were developed for the treatment of seizure disorders, such as epilepsy. However, some of these medications tend to act more rapidly on acute mood disturbances, especially mania. Like lithium, these drugs have some side effects and certain precautions must be exercised when taking them.

Side Effects of Anticonvulsants

These medications cause mild side effects in many people. Often these side effects are temporary, but sometimes they may continue for longer periods of time. Some of the most common side effects include: fatigue, muscle aching or weakness, dry mouth, constipation or diarrhea, loss of appetite, nausea, skin rash, headache, dizziness, decreased sexual interest, and temporary hair loss. If any of these side effects is severe, the person should consult the physician.

Other side effects may be more severe and should be reported to the physician immediately. These side effects include: confusion, fever, jaundice, abnormal bruising or bleeding, swelling of lymph glands, vomiting, and vision problems (such as double vision). Anticonvulsant medications can affect both blood cells and liver function. In order to determine whether this is occurring (and to take steps to prevent harm), routine laboratory tests need to be conducted on blood samples.

Precautions When Taking Anticonvulsants

These drugs cause sedation and therefore appropriate precautions must be taken when driving or operating heavy machinery. Moderation in alcohol consumption (not more than one drink per day) is advised because the effects of alcohol are greatly increased when a person is taking anticonvulsants. The effects of sedative drugs are also enhanced by

anticonvulsants. People are usually not prescribed more than one type of anticonvulsant medication at a time.

Like lithium, the amount of anticonvulsant in the body must be monitored by taking blood tests. The anticonvulsant medications are usually not used for people with a liver disease or a blood cell or bone marrow disorder. If appropriate precautions are taken and side effects are monitored, these medications are very safe.

Antipsychotic Medications

Some antipsychotic medications also stabilize mood. More general information about antipsychotic medications can be found in the *Facts About Antipsychotic Medication* handout.

How Do Mood Stabilizers Work?

Scientists do not fully understand how mood stabilizing medications work. It is believed that these drugs influence certain neurotransmitters in the brain (chemicals in the nerve cells) that may be involved in causing the mood disturbance. There is evidence that anticonvulsants reduce the “excitability” of nerve impulses in the brain.

Importance of Regular Medication

Taking medication on a regular basis can help prevent the symptoms of mania or depression from returning or getting worse. It can be helpful to take medication at the same time each day so that it is part of the person’s daily routine. It is also important for the person to meet regularly with his or her physician to have symptoms checked, discuss side effects, and have adjustments in medications made when necessary.

Common Questions About Mood Stabilizing Medications

What If the Person Misses a Dose of Medication?

The person should consult with his or her physician to find out what to do if a dose of medication is missed.

Are Mood Stabilizing Medications Addictive?

Mood stabilizing drugs are not addictive. People who take these medications do not develop tolerance (requiring a higher dose to achieve the same effects) to these drugs. However, stopping these medications increases the person’s risk of having a relapse.

How Long Must Mood Stabilizing Medications Be Taken?

When mood stabilizers are used in the treatment of bipolar and schizoaffective disorder, these medications must often be taken throughout much of the person's life. This is similar to diabetes, in which a person must take insulin daily. Individuals with other psychiatric disorders may benefit from taking mood stabilizing medications for only a limited period of time, such as several weeks or months.

Consult a mental health professional (such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, or psychiatric nurse) about any questions you have concerning this handout.

Summary

1. Mood stabilizing medications are effective in reducing episodes of mania and depression in bipolar and schizoaffective disorder.
2. Mood stabilizers are a group of medications used mainly to treat bipolar and schizoaffective disorder.
3. Mood stabilizers affect certain neurotransmitters in the brain.
4. Mood stabilizers must be taken regularly to achieve full benefits.
5. Consult a physician if medications cause side effects.