

Lithium for Treatment of Cluster Headache

What is lithium?

Lithium carbonate (Priadel) is a preventative treatment used for cluster headaches.

What should I do before starting lithium treatment?

Before starting treatment you should have a blood test to check kidney and thyroid function. You need to have these tests monthly for the first 3 months then every 3-6 months whilst on lithium.

How should I take lithium?

Lithium can cause some side effects (see below) and to prevent these patients should start on a low dose and gradually increase.

The lithium level in your blood stream needs to be monitored carefully: it should be checked one week after starting treatment and a week after every increase in dose. The blood test should be done approximately 12 hours after the last dose i.e. take your evening dose at 9pm and have your blood test 9-10am the following morning. Once you are on a stable dose of lithium the level does not need to be checked so frequently: monthly with the thyroid and kidney tests is sufficient unless you are getting side effects.

The starting dose of lithium is 200mg twice a day. If you do not have side effects but you are still having cluster headaches and the lithium level in your blood is below 0.8mmol/l then you should increase the dose by 100mg twice a day i.e. up to 300mg twice a day in the second week. The lithium dose can be increased weekly like this until the headaches are controlled or the lithium level in your blood is between 0.8-1.0mmol/l. Patients usually need between 600-1200mg daily, though some require higher doses. If you get troublesome side effects then of course the dose should not be increased. It can take several days for the result of your lithium level blood test to get back to your doctor, so stay on the same lithium dose until told to increase by your doctor.



Side effects:

- Gastrointestinal disturbance (e.g. nausea, loss of appetite, diarrhoea), tremor, frequent urination, excessive thirst, weight gain, swollen ankles.
- High blood levels of lithium can cause blurred vision, loss of appetite, drowsiness, unsteadiness, speech disturbance.
- Underactive thyroid can occur with long term use.
- 'Non-steroidal' anti-inflammatory drugs e.g. diclofenac, ibuprofen, naproxen can increase the level of lithium in the blood and should be avoided while on lithium.

This leaflet is intended to provide a brief overview of aspects of this treatment protocol. It is not intended as a substitute for the comprehensive 'product information' leaflet found inside all boxes of medication. The 'product information' leaflet should always be read before taking medication.

Your prescribing doctor will discuss the risks and benefits of the medication as it relates to you and answer any further questions you may have.

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