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When Lithium Causes Acne

The bipolar disorder treatment lithium can cause acne. Find out why, and get tips to manage your complexion.

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The medication lithium is a commonly prescribed bipolar disorder treatment, but you may not be prepared for the negative effects it can have on your complexion. Up to one-third of patients who take lithium will find that the medication causes frequent breakouts of acne, or pimples, says Amy Derick, MD, a dermatologist in Barrington, Ill.

These breakouts can occur on the face, around the hairline, and even on the arms and legs. But unlike typical teenage acne, the blemishes that occur usually don't have whiteheads or blackheads. "It's more like pustules, which are little red bumps," says Dr. Derick.

Doctors aren't sure exactly why lithium causes chronic acne, but some theorize that it has to do with the activity of neutrophils in the body. Neutrophils are white blood cells that fight infection. When lithium is taken, many neutrophils move from the bloodstream to the skin, where they can cause inflammation and increase the likelihood of pimples.

"When an infection occurs, neutrophils are usually the first blood cells on the scene that cause inflammation and kill bacteria," Derick says. "Lithium probably simulates in some way what the skin would experience when it has a bacterial infection."

Skin Strategies for Chronic Acne

If your acne is bothersome, decreasing your lithium dosage with your doctor's consent can often help your skin improve. If that's not possible, it's best to consult a dermatologist about acne treatments, since lithium-induced pimples are generally harder to get rid of than other types of blemishes.

One possible treatment for this type of acne is tretinoin (Retin-A, Renova, Atralin), a topical drug that works by unclogging pores and promoting peeling of the affected skin. However, it is important to talk to your doctor about possible side effects before using this medication.

The drug isotretinoin (previously marketed as Accutane, but now available only as a generic) should be considered only if absolutely necessary, since its reported side effects include birth defects, depression, and psychosis (feelings of delusion and hallucination). This can be

especially dangerous for someone with bipolar disorder. You should proceed with caution so you don't have some sort of manic or depressive episode," Derick says.

Having a good anti-acne skin care routine can also be helpful in fighting breakouts while you are taking lithium. An over-the-counter cleansing product that contains salicylic acid, which reduces swelling and unclogs pores, should be used twice a day for optimum results.

When buying beauty products, such as moisturizer or foundation, be sure that the label says that the formula is non-comedogenic, meaning it has been formulated to not clog pores, which can lead to breakouts. Also, choose a sunscreen that uses titanium dioxide or zinc oxide as a physical barrier against the sun, rather than chemicals that absorb UV rays. Those types of sunscreens are usually better for people who have acne problems," Derick says.

Finally, try not to get too down about your acne. Some patients on lithium have found that their skin problems decrease after about six months of treatment, as their bodies adjust to the new medicine. It can get better," Derick says.



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