psychofarm

MEDICATION HOW-TO

Propranolol for Tremor From Lithium or Valproate

Steadier hands, safely

For people whose prescriber has started propranolol for a shaky-hands tremor from lithium or valproate: how to take it, how to judge it, and when a tremor means trouble.

Lithium and **valproate** (Depakote) often cause a fine tremor: a small, fast shake of the hands that shows when you hold a cup, write or text. It is usually harmless, but it can be embarrassing and get in the way. **Propranolol**, a beta blocker that also treats other kinds of tremor, often calms it; it is used off label for this. It helps many people but not everyone, and it does not fix a tremor caused by a level that is too high. That is why your prescriber checks your level and other causes first.

⚠ FIRST: COULD YOUR LEVEL BE TOO HIGH?

- A tremor that is getting worse, a coarse (large) shake, or a tremor with nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, unsteady walking, slurred speech, confusion or unusual sleepiness can mean too much medicine.
- **On lithium:** hold your next dose and call your prescriber right away. Go to the ER for repeated vomiting, a coarse shake, unsteadiness, confusion or slurred speech, and say you take lithium.
- **On valproate:** get help right away, or go to the ER, for new confusion, unusual sleepiness or vomiting.

THE USUAL PATH

Check the level → Try the simple fixes → Add propranolol → Judge it over 1 to 2 weeks

HOW TO TAKE IT

1. **Take it at the times your prescriber set.** Often two or three times a day, or once a day as a long-acting capsule. Always with food or always without, because food changes how much you absorb.
2. **Time it to when you need steady hands.** If your prescriber agrees, a dose about an hour before writing, work or a meal out can help.
3. **Keep taking your lithium or valproate.** Do not lower or skip it on your own: that can bring back mania or depression. Your prescriber may lower the dose, switch to a slow-release form, or move more of it to bedtime.
4. **Cut back on caffeine, slowly.** Coffee, energy drinks and strong tea make tremor worse. On lithium, cut down gradually and tell your prescriber: less caffeine can raise your level.
5. **If you miss a dose.** Take it when you remember, unless the next dose is close: then skip the missed one. Never double up.
6. **Rate it, and draw a spiral.** Rate your tremor from 0 to 10 each day on page 2, and draw a spiral there once a week. Bring both to your visit.

SIGNS IT IS WORKING

- You can hold a cup, write or type without spilling or slipping.
- Your weekly spiral looks smoother.
- Your 0 to 10 rating comes down.

TELL YOUR PRESCRIBER IF

- It is no better after one to two weeks at a steady dose.
- Tiredness or dizziness gets in the way.
- Your mood drops, or you feel flat or unusually low.
- The tremor is getting worse (see the box above).

OTHER THINGS THAT CAUSE OR HELP TREMOR

WORTH CHECKING	WHY
Other medicines and substances	Some antidepressants, stimulants, asthma inhalers, too much thyroid medicine, caffeine, nicotine, and coming off alcohol can all add to a tremor.
Stress, poor sleep and low blood sugar	Each makes a tremor more noticeable. A regular snack and steady sleep help.
Vitamin B6, lithium only	Some prescribers suggest an active form of B6 (P5P) for lithium tremor. The evidence is small, and too much B6 can harm nerves; ask first.
If propranolol is not enough	Primidone or topiramate are sometimes used. With valproate, topiramate can cause confusion. Your prescriber weighs these.

WHAT YOU MAY NOTICE

- Tiredness or low energy, mostly at first.
- Dizziness when you stand up fast. Stand up slowly.
- Cold hands and feet, vivid dreams, or less stamina for hard exercise.
- A slower heartbeat. That is how it works. Feeling faint is not.

GOOD TO KNOW

- Tell your prescriber about asthma, other lung disease or a slow heartbeat: propranolol can worsen them.
- With diabetes, it can hide the shaky, racing-heart signs of low blood sugar. Rely on glucose checks.
- Some antidepressants and heart medicines, such as verapamil, add to it. Ask your pharmacist about any new medicine.
- If you take it every day, do not stop it suddenly.

MY WEEKLY SPIRAL



Example | Week 1 | Week 2 | Week 3 | Week 4

Once a week, draw a spiral like the example with your shakier hand, wrist off the table.

MY FIRST WEEK

DAY	TREMOR (0 TO 10)	HARDEST TASK TODAY	SIDE EFFECTS
Day 1			
Day 2			
Day 3			
Day 4			
Day 5			
Day 6			
Day 7			

Rate tremor from 0 (none) to 10 (cannot hold a cup).

GET HELP RIGHT AWAY

Call 911 for wheezing or trouble breathing that does not ease, fainting, chest pain, a seizure, or swelling of the face, lips or throat.

Go to the ER for the signs of a too-high level on page 1.

Call your prescriber the same day for a very slow or uneven heartbeat, dizziness that will not settle, or new wheezing even if it eases.

If anyone takes too much, call Poison Control at 1-800-222-1222 right away, even if they seem fine, and call 911 if they collapse or cannot be woken. Keep it away from children.

MY PLAN

My propranolol dose and times (from my prescriber):

My lithium or valproate, and my last level:

What else I am trying (caffeine, timing):

My prescriber's phone number:

Source. Written in new words for patients from the FDA-approved propranolol, lithium and valproate labels and a 2022 systematic review of treatments for tremor caused by medicines. Propranolol is used off label for this. The dose is set by your prescriber.

More free resources → psycho.farm/free

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