

Calcium Channel Blockers

Calcium channel blockers are blood pressure medicines that also improve mood cycling in bipolar disorder. They include amlodipine, isradipine, nimodipine, and verapamil. Although they are not FDA-approved in bipolar disorder, they are supported by clinical trials and share a similar mechanism to other mood stabilizers.

They are particularly helpful for ultra-rapid cycles of mood, where people have mood swings every few days or every few weeks. They can also improve anxiety and tremor.

Nimodipine also improve vascular depression, a type of depression that happens in people with heart or vascular disease. Vascular depression is very common after age 60 and does not respond well to antidepressants.

Side Effects and Warnings

Dizziness, stomach upset, rare swelling (edema). They can lower blood pressure, which may lead to unexpected fainting.

Calcium channel blockers should not be taken by people with heart disease without the approval of their cardiologist or primary care physician.

How often to take them

Amlodipine = once a day
Isradipine = twice a day (or once a day as ER)
Nimodipine = three times a day
Verapamil = three times a day (or once a day as ER)

Food and drug interactions

Nimodipine levels are lowered by food (30-40%), so do not take within 1 hour of eating. The others can be taken with or without food.

Caution with grapefruit. Whether in juice or whole form, grapefruit raises levels of calcium channel blockers, even if you take them at a different time than eating the grapefruit.

Key Points

1. Calcium channel blockers lower blood pressure. They also reduce cycling in bipolar disorder and treat depression and anxiety.
2. Read about the food and drug interactions
3. Some are available as extended release forms that can be taken once a day.

Verapamil can make the effects of alcohol last longer than expected. Verapamil can lower or raise levels of lithium, so closer monitoring of that medicine is necessary when taking them together.

What if I forget a dose?

Take the missed dose as soon as you remember it. However, if it is almost time for the next dose, skip the missed dose and continue your regular dosing schedule. Do not take a double dose to make up for a missed one.

Cost and insurance coverage

These medications are generic. If paying out of pocket, you'll find the lowest price at www.goodrx.com.

How to store and dispose of medication

- Keep out of the reach of children.
- Store away from heat, direct light and damp places.
- To safely dispose of unwanted pills: Do not pour in the toilet or sink (it will enter the water supply). To prevent children or pets from eating it, mix unwanted pills in a bag with a little water and inedible trash (such as

coffee grounds or kitty litter) and throw in the trash.

—Chris Aiken, MD, updated 6/23/202

