

Bipolar Disorder

INFORMATION FOR PATIENTS AND FAMILIES

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What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression, is a biological disorder. This chronic (lifelong) illness causes unusual shifts in your mood, energy, and ability to function.

When you have bipolar disorder, your mood shifts are severe — quite different from normal, everyday ups and downs. Untreated, these mood shifts can hurt your relationships and your performance at work or school. They cause poor decisions and distort your sense of self. Not surprisingly, people with untreated bipolar disorder are at risk for suicide.

But there is good news. **Bipolar disorder is highly treatable.** With good medical help for your illness, you can lead a full and productive life.

BIPOLAR DISORDER IS...

More common than you might think

This illness affects more than 5.7 million Americans, both children and adults.

Chronic and serious

Bipolar disorder won't go away. And without treatment, it won't get better. Untreated, it can cause serious problems in every area of life and can even result in disability or death.

A treatable illness

With good medical help, people with bipolar disorder can manage their disease and enjoy more balanced, healthy lives.

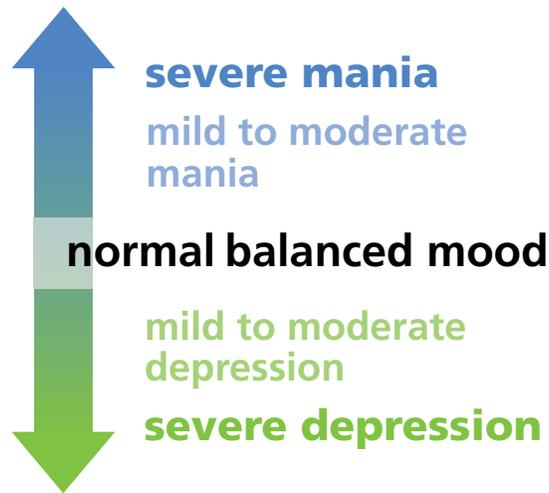


What are the symptoms of bipolar disorder?

Most of the time, people with bipolar disorder have depression. They experience the same symptoms as unipolar (major) depression. Bipolar depression often begins before age 25 — sometimes in the teen years — with symptoms such as too much sleep or too large an appetite.

The other side of bipolar disorder is a period with symptoms of mania, often called a “manic episode.” Manic episodes are often portrayed in the media as wonderful highs, where people feel great and even godlike. In reality, most manic “highs” make a person irritable and are mixed with depressive symptoms. Bipolar disorder is diagnosed when a person has had at least one manic episode.

People with bipolar disorder experience episodes of manic symptoms and depressive symptoms. These symptoms are not usual for a person and happen for several days or longer.



Symptoms of MANIA

(a manic episode)

- **Feeling on top of the world.** You feel so good — or you are so hyper — that other people notice you are not your normal self.
- **Feeling invincible.** You feel more self-confident, even to the extreme of feeling that you have special or godlike powers.
- **Hyperactivity.** You're full of energy. You over-schedule your days. You can't relax or sit still.
- **Risky behavior.** You do things that are unusual for you, and that other people think are excessive, foolish, or risky. This often includes excessive spending, uncharacteristic sexual behavior, or reckless driving.
- **Uncontrollable racing thoughts or rapid speech.** You can't slow your mind down. You speak faster than usual.
- **Less need for sleep.** You get much less sleep than usual and find that you really do not miss it.
- **Irritability or rage.** You become so irritable that you shout at people, or you start fights or arguments.

Symptoms of DEPRESSION

(a depressive episode)

- **Intense sadness or despair.** You feel helpless, hopeless, and worthless.
- **No interest in activities you once enjoyed.** Your favorite things hold little interest and don't cheer you up.
- **Loss of energy.** You're tired and weary. It's hard to force yourself to do anything. You move slowly.
- **Sleep difficulties.** You sleep all the time — or not at all.
- **Changes in appetite.** You're more or less hungry than usual. You gain a lot of weight — or lose weight without dieting.
- **Difficulty concentrating.** Your mind wanders. You have trouble remembering things or making decisions.
- **Thoughts of death or suicide.** You don't see the point of living. You wonder if you should end everything.



WARNING SIGNS

Depression symptoms can lead a person to think of ending their life. These thoughts are dangerous and can put you and your family at risk. If you have thoughts like these while you are being treated for depression, be sure to contact your doctor right away. Effective treatment can help you see the value of life clearly again.

How often do episodes happen?

The frequency of episodes — often called “cycling” — is different for each person. People with bipolar disorder have periods of normal moods in between times of having depressive symptoms, manic symptoms, or the combination.

Over the course of a person’s life, “episodes” of mood symptoms can occur every few years, or as frequently as mood shifts that cycle throughout the day. A depressive episode and a manic episode can also occur at the same time. This is called a “mixed episode.” These are particularly uncomfortable and severe.

What causes bipolar disorder?

Most scientists now agree that there is no single cause for bipolar disorder. Rather, several factors may act together to produce it.

Genetics are almost certainly involved. Why do we think so? Bipolar disorder runs in families. In fact, 80 to 90 percent of people with this illness have a relative with depression or bipolar disorder.

But genetics aren’t the only cause. If they were, identical twins would always develop the disorder together and research shows that they don’t. Most likely, the disorder is “triggered” in a person who already has a genetic tendency toward it. Possible triggers include physical conditions (like pregnancy) or very stressful life events.

CO-EXISTING CONDITIONS

People with bipolar disorder often have other mental health problems as well. Problems that often occur with bipolar disorder include:

- **Anxiety disorders**, such as panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder or GAD (which causes extreme worry), phobias (specific fears), or agoraphobia and social phobia (which causes people to avoid social situations).
- **Alcohol or drug abuse.**

If you have any of these problems, you’ll need to have treatment for it as well.



How is bipolar disorder diagnosed?

Doctors use several different tools to learn about your condition and make a diagnosis, such as:

- **Questionnaires.** Your doctor may use questionnaires (forms) to check for bipolar disorder and other mental health problems. The questionnaires ask about your symptoms at different times. They may also ask about stress, your coping style, and the support you have in your life.
- **Medical history.** Your doctor asks about your past and present illnesses and your family history.
- **Family input.** Your doctor may ask if he or she can talk with family members or close friends to get their insights on your symptoms.
- **Physical exam.** An exam helps your doctor know if your symptoms come from something other than bipolar disorder.
- **Guidelines for diagnosis.** Your doctor compares your information to the standard medical definition for bipolar disorder.



How is bipolar disorder treated?

Bipolar disorder can be treated in a couple of ways, including:

- **Medication.** The main treatment for bipolar disorder is medication. Your doctor will probably recommend that you take a mood stabilizer (such as lithium) every day. A mood stabilizer can help prevent wild mood swings.

Also, from time to time you may need to take other medications to treat episodes of mania or depression that break through despite the mood stabilizer. With bipolar disorder, it can be harmful to use an antidepressant alone. Unlike unipolar (major) depression, this can make you less stable, or even bring on a manic episode.

What's the most important thing to remember? Keep taking your medication even after you start to feel better. Consistent treatment is the key to keeping symptoms at bay.

- **Counseling.** Also called psychotherapy or “talk therapy,” counseling can help you — and your loved ones — work out some of the problems caused by your illness. Support groups and advocacy groups can help, too.

As you and your doctor begin to plan your treatment, keep in mind that it may take some time to find a good plan for you. Don't give up. You have many options for treatment. If your illness isn't controlled, you and your healthcare providers can try a new approach.



Self-management action plan

Many people have overcome the challenge of bipolar disorder — but not without help.

- **Find the right doctor.** Your family doctor should stay involved in your care. You also need to work with a specialist in treating your bipolar disorder. Your family doctor can help you find a specialist if needed.
- **Involve your family and other loved ones.** Early in your treatment, help your family and other loved ones understand your illness. You may want to have joint meetings with your psychiatrist or therapist to make sure your family knows what to expect from treatment — and how they can help. There may be times when they need to intervene to make sure you're safe.
- **Develop and maintain your treatment plan.** Mental health care isn't "one size fits all." With your doctors and loved ones, decide on a treatment plan that fits your unique situation. Make sure it includes what to do in case you're unable to help yourself or follow your treatment on your own.
- **Monitor your symptoms.** Watch for warning signs (see page 2) and work to manage these symptoms.
- **Set goals for healthy living in ALL areas.** Finding balance in life will help you manage your illness. Set goals to get there:
 - **Relationships.** Don't shut out family and friends! Example goals: Phone a friend every day. Attend scheduled social events. Volunteer.
My goal: _____
 - **Nutrition, exercise, and sleep.** Along with healthy food and activity, regular, uninterrupted sleep is very important for a stable mood. Not sleeping can be an early sign that your illness is getting worse, or it can set off an episode even if you're feeling normal. Example goals: Eat 5 to 10 fruits and vegetables daily. Walk each day. Sleep 8 hours each night.
My goal: _____
 - **Recreation and renewal.** Commit to having fun and soothing your spirit. Example goals: Listen to music. Attend religious or cultural events. Write in a journal. Meditate.
My goal: _____
- **Stick to your treatment.** Take medication as directed, even when you start feeling better. Keep your appointments. Tell your doctor if you don't see good results — you can always adjust your plan. You deserve relief, and you have a great chance to get it.
- **Celebrate your recovery.** Reward yourself for meeting your goals, and celebrate treatment milestones. Did you sleep well through the night? Notice warning signs and manage them? Congratulate yourself! Your hard work is paying off.

