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.
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.

WARNING SIGNS
For a few weeks before an episode, you might notice small changes in your mood or behavior. If you find ways to manage these, you can help prevent the episode. Warning signs include subtle shifts in your mood, sleep patterns, or the way you deal with people. Family or friends might notice these symptoms earlier than you do. Enlist their help in spotting them — so you can work to avoid a relapse.
People with bipolar disorder may often have other mental health problems as well. Here are those that often occur with bipolar disorder:

- Anxiety disorders, such as panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder (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 one 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:

- **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?

- **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. Unlike unipolar (major) depression, with bipolar disorder it can be harmful to use an antidepressant alone — 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.

WHERE CAN I LEARN MORE ABOUT BIPOLAR DISORDER?
Visit Intermountain Healthcare’s Mental Health Online Center:
www.intermountainhealthcare.org/mentalhealth.
You’ll find this handout and materials on other common mental health concerns. You’ll also find links to other trusted sources for information, support, and advice for people with bipolar disorder.

SELF-MANAGEMENT ACTION PLAN
Many people have overcome the challenge of bipolar disorder — but not without help. See the tips below:

- **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 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.