

Health topics

Bipolar Mood Disorder



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What is Bipolar Mood Disorder?

Bipolar Mood Disorder involves periods of elevated or irritable mood (mania), alternating with periods of depression. The “mood swings” between mania and depression can be very abrupt.

Bipolar mood disorder affects men and women equally. It usually appears between ages 15 - 25.

Alternative names are manic depression or bipolar affective disorder.

What causes it?

The exact cause is unknown, but it occurs more often in relatives of people with Bipolar Mood Disorder.

Types of Bipolar Disorder:

- ❖ People with Bipolar Disorder **type I** have had at least one fully manic episode with periods of major depression. In the past, Bipolar Disorder type I was called manic depression
- ❖ People with Bipolar Disorder **type II** have never experienced full-fledged mania. Instead they experience periods of hypomania (elevated levels of energy and impulsiveness that are not as extreme as the symptoms of mania). These hypomanic periods alternate with episodes of depression
- ❖ A mild form of Bipolar Disorder called **cyclothymia** involves less severe mood swings with alternating periods of hypomania and mild depression. People with Bipolar Disorder type II or cyclothymia may be misdiagnosed as having depression alone

In most people with Bipolar Disorder, there is no clear cause for the manic or depressive episodes. The following may trigger a manic episode in people who are vulnerable to the illness:

- ❖ Life changes such as childbirth
- ❖ Medications such as antidepressants or steroids
- ❖ Periods of sleeplessness
- ❖ Recreational drug use

What are the symptoms?

The manic phase may last from days to months and can include the following symptoms:

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| ❖ Agitation or irritation | ❖ Over-involvement in activities |
| ❖ Inflated self-esteem (delusions of grandeur, false beliefs in special abilities) | ❖ Poor temper control |
| ❖ Little need for sleep | ❖ Reckless behavior |
| ❖ Noticeably elevated mood | o Binge eating, drinking, and/or drug use |
| o Hyperactivity | o Impaired judgment |
| o Increased energy | o Sexual promiscuity |
| o Lack of self-control | o Spending sprees |
| o Racing thoughts | ❖ Tendency to be easily distracted |

These symptoms of mania are seen with Bipolar Disorder I. In people with bipolar disorder II, hypomanic episodes involve similar symptoms that are less intense.

The depressed phase of both types of Bipolar Disorder includes the following symptoms:

- ❖ Daily low mood
- ❖ Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- ❖ Eating disturbances
 - o Loss of appetite and weight loss
 - o Overeating and weight gain
- ❖ Fatigue or listlessness
- ❖ Feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness and/or guilt
- ❖ Loss of self-esteem
- ❖ Persistent sadness
- ❖ Persistent thoughts of death
- ❖ Sleep disturbances
 - o Excessive sleepiness
 - o Inability to sleep
- ❖ Suicidal thoughts
- ❖ Withdrawal from activities that were once enjoyed
- ❖ Withdrawal from friends

There is a high risk of suicide with Bipolar Disorder. While in either phase, patients may abuse alcohol or other substances, which can make the symptoms worse.

Sometimes there is an overlap between the two phases. Manic and depressive symptoms may occur together or quickly one after the other in what is called a mixed state.

How is it diagnosed?

A diagnosis of Bipolar Disorder involves consideration of many factors. The health care provider may do some or all of the following:

- ❖ Ask about your family medical history, particularly whether anyone has or had Bipolar Disorder
- ❖ Ask about your recent mood swings and for how long you've experienced them
- ❖ Observe your behaviour and mood
- ❖ Perform a thorough examination to identify or rule out physical causes for the symptoms
- ❖ Request laboratory tests to check for thyroid problems or drug levels
- ❖ Speak with your family members to discuss their observations about your behaviour
- ❖ Take a medical history, including any medical problems you have and any medications you take

Note: Use of recreational drugs may be responsible for some symptoms, though this does not rule out bipolar affective disorder. Drug abuse may itself be a symptom of Bipolar Disorder.

How can bipolar mood disorder affect my health?

Stopping or improperly taking medication can cause your symptoms to come back, and lead to the following complications:

- ❖ Alcohol and/or drug abuse as a strategy to "self-medicate"
- ❖ Personal relationships, work, and finances suffer
- ❖ Suicidal thoughts and behaviours

Suicide is a very real risk during both mania and depression. Suicidal thoughts, ideas, and gestures in people with Bipolar Disorder require immediate emergency attention.

Treatment

This illness is challenging to treat. Patients and their friends and family must be aware of the risks of neglecting to treat Bipolar Disorder.

Spells of depression or mania return in most patients, in spite of treatment. The major goals of treatment are to:

- ❖ Avoid cycling from one phase to another
- ❖ Avoid the need for a hospital stay
- ❖ Help the patient function as best as possible between episodes
- ❖ Prevent self-destructive behaviour, including suicide
- ❖ Reduce the severity and frequency of episodes

The doctor will first try to determine what may have triggered the mood episode, and identify any medical or emotional problems that might interfere with or complicate treatment.

Medicines called mood stabilizers are considered to be the first-line treatment. The following are commonly used mood stabilizers:

- ❖ Carbamazepine
- ❖ Lamotrigine
- ❖ Lithium
- ❖ Valproate (valproic acid)

Other anti-seizure drugs may also be tried.

Other drugs used to treat Bipolar Disorder include:

- ❖ Antipsychotic drugs (Zyprexa) and anti-anxiety drugs (benzodiazepines), which can be used to stabilize mood
- ❖ Anti-depressant medications can be added to mood-stabilizing drugs to treat depression. People with Bipolar Disorder are more likely to have manic or hypomanic episodes if they are put on antidepressants. Because of this, an antidepressant is only used in people who are also taking a mood stabilizer

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) may be used to treat the manic or depressive phase of bipolar disorder that does not respond to medication.

- ❖ ECT is a psychiatric treatment that uses an electrical current to cause a brief seizure of the central nervous system while the patient is under anaesthesia
- ❖ ECT is the most effective treatment for depression that is not relieved with medications

Patients who are in the middle of manic or depressive episodes may need to stay in a hospital until their mood is stabilized and their behaviours are under control.

Doctors are still trying to decide the best way to treat Bipolar Disorder in children and adolescents. Parents should consider the potential risks and benefits of treatment for their children.

Your role in managing your condition

Mood-stabilizing medication can help control the symptoms of Bipolar Disorder. However, patients often need help and support to take medicine properly and to ensure that any episodes of mania and depression are treated as early as possible.

Some people stop taking the medication as soon as they feel better or because they want to experience the productivity and creativity associated with mania. Although these early manic states may feel good, discontinuing medication may have very negative consequences. Make sure you take your medication as prescribed by your doctor.

Call your health provider or an emergency number right way if:

- ❖ You are having thoughts of death or suicide
- ❖ You are experiencing severe symptoms of depression or mania
- ❖ You have been diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder and your symptoms have returned or you are having any new symptoms

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