

A Resource for Consumers

Understanding Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder is a brain disorder that affects people's moods. People with bipolar disorder have moods and feelings that are more extreme than normal ups and downs.

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Bipolar disorder is a brain disorder that affects people's moods. Bipolar I disorder, marked by extreme manic episodes, has a lifetime prevalence of 2.1% and a 12-month prevalence of 1.5%. This equates to approximately 4.9 million and 3.7 million adult Americans, respectively, who are affected.



What Is Bipolar Disorder?

Bipolar disorder is a common and serious condition. Bipolar disorder is a chronic mental illness and refers to several diagnoses, including bipolar I, bipolar II, and cyclothymic disorder. It causes people to have large shifts in their moods. Moods can range from extreme happiness and high energy to extreme sadness and low energy. These moods may be severe enough to affect your ability to carry out day-to-day tasks.

Bipolar I disorder is defined by manic episodes lasting at least 7 days, or by manic symptoms requiring immediate hospitalization. A diagnosis of Bipolar II disorder is identified by a pattern of depressive episodes and hypomanic episodes, but not the full-blown manic episodes seen with bipolar I. With cyclothymic disorder, individuals experience numerous periods of hypomanic symptoms and depressive symptoms lasting for at least 2 years.

Bipolar disorder is a chronic mental illness and refers to several diagnoses, including:

- Bipolar I
- Bipolar II
- Cyclothymic disorder



While bipolar II seems to be more common in women, bipolar I disorder affects men and women equally. The onset of bipolar disorder typically begins between the ages of 15-24. Medicine and therapy may help people with bipolar disorder manage their symptoms and the disease.

Signs and Symptoms of Bipolar Disorder People with bipolar disorder have moods and feelings that are more extreme than normal ups and downs. These moods and feelings can affect your ability to sleep, stay focused, think clearly, or have relationships. You may have “manic episodes” and feel hyper or have lots of energy. You may also have “depressive episodes” when you feel extremely sad. These episodes may last most of the day, every day, for a week, or longer. Depressive episodes are thought to happen more often than manic episodes.

***If you or a loved one experiences any of these symptoms, seek professional help by talking to your doctor.**

Signs of a manic episode*:

- Feeling very “up,” “high,” or “wired”
- Increased energy levels (beyond normal)
- Having trouble sleeping (insomnia)
- Being more active than usual
- Talking very fast and about many topics
- Being agitated or irritable
- Racing thoughts
- Believing one is more able to do several things at once (multitask)
- Doing risky things, like spending a lot of money or engaging in promiscuous sex

Signs of a depressive episode*:

- Feeling very “down,” sad, or hopeless
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Feeling unable to enjoy anything
- Feeling worried or empty
- Having trouble concentrating
- Forgetfulness
- Eating too much or too little
- Thoughts about death or suicide



Diagnosing Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder may be difficult to diagnose. Sometimes, people with bipolar disorder are misdiagnosed as having depression or other condition. However, people with bipolar disorder also have manic episodes.

You should tell your treatment team about past manic episodes. This will help your treatment team make a correct diagnosis. You should also tell them if other family members have bipolar disorder. Although bipolar disorder tends to run in families, not everyone with a family history will develop the illness.

If you believe that you or a loved one may have bipolar disorder, ask your doctor or other healthcare practitioner for a screening.

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Your Treatment Team

Getting help is important! A treatment team can be made up of several healthcare professionals who can give you information about bipolar disorder. They may also be able to help you manage your illness.

Here's an introduction to who might be on a treatment team:

Psychiatrists

The psychiatrist is a medical doctor who specializes in mental health and prescribes medication

Nurse Practitioners and Physician Assistants

Many psychiatrists will rely on these healthcare professionals to help manage day-to-day treatment

Psychologists, Psychiatric Social Workers, and Counselors

These are professionals who help consumers with therapy, such as cognitive behavior therapy or family therapy

Nurses

Nurses work closely with you and your caregivers, case workers and social workers to discuss treatment and your needs

Social Workers

Social workers also offer counseling. They may help you find various social services to help with problems in your daily life

Case Managers

A case manager can help find services and programs to help with daily living. They can also help you apply for benefits



Questions? Concerns?

Never hesitate to ask. You have a right to know everything about your health and your care.

If you have any questions or concerns about your condition or your care, ask your doctor or a member of your treatment team right away. They are there to help you.

