



National Alliance on Mental Illness
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Bipolar Disorder Fact Sheet

What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder, or manic depression, is a medical illness that causes extreme shifts in mood, energy, and functioning. These changes may be subtle or dramatic and typically vary greatly over the course of a person's life as well as among individuals. Over 10 million people in America have bipolar disorder, and the illness affects men and women equally. Bipolar disorder is a chronic and generally life-long condition with recurring episodes of mania and depression that can last from days to months that often begin in adolescence or early adulthood, and occasionally even in children. Most people generally require some sort of lifelong treatment. While medication is one key element in successful treatment of bipolar disorder, psychotherapy, support, and education about the illness are also essential components of the treatment process.

What are the symptoms of mania?

Mania is the word that describes the activated phase of bipolar disorder. The symptoms of mania may include:

- either an elated, happy mood or an irritable, angry, unpleasant mood
- increased physical and mental activity and energy
- racing thoughts and flight of ideas
- increased talking, more rapid speech than normal
- ambitious, often grandiose plans
- risk taking
- impulsive activity such as spending sprees, sexual indiscretion, and alcohol abuse
- decreased sleep without experiencing fatigue

What are the symptoms of depression?

Depression is the other phase of bipolar disorder. The symptoms of depression may include:

- loss of energy
- prolonged sadness
- decreased activity and energy
- restlessness and irritability
- inability to concentrate or make decisions
- increased feelings of worry and anxiety
- less interest or participation in, and less enjoyment of activities normally enjoyed
- feelings of guilt and hopelessness
- thoughts of suicide
- change in appetite (either eating more or eating less)
- change in sleep patterns (either sleeping more or sleeping less)

What is a "mixed" state?

A mixed state is when symptoms of mania and depression occur at the same time. During a mixed state depressed mood accompanies manic activation.

What is rapid cycling?

Sometimes individuals may experience an increased frequency of episodes. When four or more episodes of illness occur within a 12-month period, the individual is said to have bipolar disorder with rapid cycling. Rapid cycling is more common in women.

What are the causes of bipolar disorder?

While the exact cause of bipolar disorder is not known, most scientists believe that bipolar disorder is likely caused by multiple factors that interact with each other to produce a chemical imbalance affecting certain parts of the brain. Bipolar disorder often runs in families, and studies suggest a genetic component to the illness. A stressful environment or negative life events may interact with an underlying genetic or biological vulnerability to produce the disorder. There are other possible "triggers" of bipolar episodes: the treatment of depression with an antidepressant medication may trigger a switch into mania, sleep deprivation may trigger mania, or hypothyroidism may produce depression or mood instability. It is important to note that bipolar episodes can and often do occur without any obvious trigger.

How is bipolar disorder treated?

While there is no cure for bipolar disorder, it is a treatable and manageable illness. After an accurate diagnosis, most people can achieve an optimal level of wellness. Medication is an essential element of successful treatment for people with bipolar disorder. In addition, psychosocial therapies including cognitive-behavioral therapy, interpersonal therapy, family therapy, and psychoeducation are important to help people understand the illness and to internalize skills to cope with the stresses that can trigger episodes. Changes in medications or doses may be necessary, as well as changes in treatment plans during different stages of the illness.

Reviewed by Ken Duckworth, MD, October 2006