

What you need to know about

Bipolar Disorder

What is it?

Bipolar disorder is in a class of mood disorders that is marked by dramatic changes in mood, energy and behaviour. The key characteristic of people with bipolar disorder is alternating between episodes of mania (extreme elevated mood) and depression (extreme sadness). These episodes can last from hours to months. The mood disturbances are severe enough to affect the person's ability to function. The experience of mania can be very frightening and lead to impulsive behaviour that has serious consequences for the person and the family. A depressive episode makes it difficult or impossible for a person to function in his or her daily life

Bipolar disorder is a medical condition that can be treated.

How prevalent is it?

Bipolar disorder affects approximately 3 to 5% of the adult population and is equally distributed between males and females.

Who is at risk?

If you have a family member with bipolar disorder, you may be slightly more likely to develop it yourself.

What are the risk factors/triggers?

Bipolar disorder has no single proven cause, but research suggests that the condition is due to abnormalities in the way some nerve cells in the brain function or communicate. The disorder makes people more vulnerable to emotional and physical stress. As a result, stresses, such as upsetting experiences, substance use or lack of sleep, can trigger episodes, even though they do not actually cause the disorder.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of depression include:

- Sad mood
- Preoccupation with failures or inadequacies
- Loss of self-esteem
- Slowed thinking, forgetfulness
- Difficulties in concentrating and in making decisions
- Loss of interest in work, hobbies, people
- Social isolation
- Lethargy or agitation
- Changes in appetite — eating too little or too much
- Oversleeping or insomnia
- Decreased sexual drive
- Suicidal thoughts

Symptoms of mania include:

- Elevated, expansive mood
- Extreme irritability
- Rapid, unpredictable emotional changes
- Racing thoughts, flights of ideas
- Overreaction to stimuli
- Misinterpretation of events
- Increased interest in activities
- Overspending
- Sense of grandiosity, inflated self-esteem
- Excessive energy
- Decreased need for sleep
- Increased sexual drive, sexual indiscretions
- Poor judgment

What do I need to tell my doctor?

- Write down any symptoms you've had
- Write down key personal information
- Make a list of all medications you are taking
- Write down questions to ask your doctor
- Take a family member or friend along

Describe to the doctor what people think your "normal" personality is like. Describe how things are different now. Discuss all of your symptoms with your doctor and describe how they are affecting your life (e.g. racing thoughts that cause you to lose focus and not get things

done). Your doctor can suggest or provide appropriate therapy based on your symptoms. Make sure to discuss all of the available treatments and medications and their benefits and side effects before making any decisions.

What are the treatment options?

The most common forms of treatment for bipolar depression and mania are medication (mainly mood stabilizers such as Lithium or Epival) and psychotherapy, used alone or in combination with other treatments. The use of atypical antipsychotic medication such as Zyprexa, Risperidal or Seroquel has become more common, as they demonstrate fewer side effects than the older drugs, and serve to stabilize mood as well.

Some of the factors that determine the type of treatment are the nature of the symptoms, the severity and duration of the condition, possible precipitating causes and previous response to treatment. Approximately one in three people with bipolar disorder will remain completely symptom free by taking mood stabilizers.

Complementary treatments, such as peer group support and other support programs, may also be helpful.

Additional treatments, such as massage, mindfulness meditation, shiatsu, therapeutic touch, aromatherapy, tai chi, Pilates and yoga, can also help improve wellness.

What are the things I need to do to get well?

There are a number of medications available to effectively treat bipolar disorder. Often, the most effective treatment is a combination of medication and psychotherapy. There are also certain lifestyle choices that can supplement treatments:

Stick to your treatment plan. Don't skip psychotherapy sessions. Even if you're feeling well, continue to take medication as prescribed.

Learn about bipolar disorder. Empower yourself by learning about your condition.

Pay attention to the warning signs. Find out what triggers episodes. Make a plan so that you know what to do if your symptoms get worse. Contact your doctor or therapist if you notice any changes. Ask friends or family to watch out for warning signs.

Get exercise. Physical activity reduces symptoms of depression. Consider walking, jogging, swimming, gardening, or any other physical activity.

Avoid alcohol and illicit drugs. It may seem like they lessen symptoms, but in the long run, the symptoms generally get worse and may make your condition harder to treat.

Get plenty of sleep. This is especially important. If you're having trouble sleeping, talk to your doctor about what you can do.

Where can I learn more?

Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre
sunnybrook.ca/content/?page=centre-for-youth-bipolar-disorder

CREST.BD
www.crestbd.ca

Organization for Bipolar Affective Disorder
www.obad.ca

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