



Patient Information

The Highs and Lows of Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder, also called *manic-depression* (**man-ick dih-presh-un**), is a mental illness caused by a disorder in the brain that isn't well understood. The illness is characterized by extreme shifts between two conflicting moods: the manic phase in which the person feels either emotionally "high" or incredibly irritable and the depressive phase in which the person feels overwhelmingly sad and hopeless. Often, there are periods in between the mood swings in which the person feels normal. Because the person can experience normal emotional periods and since the intensity of the mood swings vary, some people can live with bipolar disorder for years before it is recognized and diagnosed.

Usually, bipolar disorder begins in late adolescence or early adulthood, though it can begin in childhood or develop late in life. Researchers aren't sure exactly what happens in the brain to cause the disorder—possibly it develops because of a chemical imbalance or because the brain cells that deal with emotion become injured—but many are conducting studies to find out. Scientists are fairly certain, however, that many factors contribute to this illness, including the person's heredity and environment.

How do I know if I'm at risk?

If you have a blood relative who has bipolar disorder, you are more vulnerable to developing the illness. In some cases, an infection caused by a virus seems to have brought on the disease. Extreme

stress, such as an emotionally traumatic event or continual sleep deprivation, is also believed to be a risk factor. There's evidence that use of certain drugs—especially cocaine or *methamphetamine* (meth-am-**fet-uh-meen**), also known as speed—may trigger the disorder. In many cases, however, there is no identifiable trigger or cause for its development.

What are the warning signs?

The signs of bipolar disorder vary depending on whether the person is in a manic or a depressive phase of the illness. The manic phase either can bring on the feeling of being "on top of the world" or can make it hard to relax, sit still, or concentrate. The person may feel agitated, angry, or as if his or her thoughts are racing. The manic phase may cause a person to require less sleep or food than usual and act recklessly or use poor judgment.

In the depressive phase, a person may cry or feel sad, hopeless, or guilty much of the time. Depressive people may withdraw from those they care about and from the things they like to do. They may experience changes in appetite or sleep patterns, be irritable or tired a lot, or lose interest in their cleanliness and health.

The length of the manic and depressive phases varies depending on the person. Some experience opposite phases every few months or weeks, others may experience both extremes more than once in a single day. Some people experience a "mixed" state in which they feel both manic and depressive at the same time.

Continued on next page

✂ These pages may be reproduced noncommercially by federal practitioners for their patients.

Continued from previous page

If you see the signs of bipolar disorder in a loved one, tell a doctor. If at any point you have thoughts of suicide, or someone you love talks about suicide, get medical help immediately by calling 911.

What tests do I need?

Bipolar disorder is diagnosed based on symptoms and the length of time the symptoms are experienced. If you think you might have the disorder, your doctor will ask you detailed questions about your symptoms and your family history. He or she also may perform a number of tests to make sure you don't have another condition with similar symptoms—for example, a substance abuse disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, or an under or overactive thyroid.

How can I avoid the problem?

Since the specific cause of bipolar disorder has yet to be identified, there is no way to prevent the disease. It is best, however, to avoid illegal drugs, especially cocaine and speed, which are known to have triggered the disease in some cases.

How is it treated?

The symptoms of bipolar disorder can be managed with medication plus professional counseling. Medical treatment for bipolar disorder usually begins with a drug to treat the manic phase. The most commonly used drug to treat this phase is *lithium* (**lith**-ee-uhm), which is called a mood stabilizer. Certain *anticonvulsant* (an-tye-kuhn-**vuhl**-suhnt) medications, including *divalproex* (dye-val-**proe**-ex), and some *antipsychotic* (an-tye-sye-**kaht**-ik) medications also may be used to treat the manic phase of the disease.

When a person with bipolar disorder experiences a depressive episode, he or

she may need additional treatment with an *antidepressant* (an-tye-dih-**press**-uhnt) medication. These medications elevate mood and stimulate action.

All of the medications used to treat both the manic and depressive phases have some unwanted effects—and none works for all individuals. If you're diagnosed with bipolar disorder, your doctor will work closely with you to get the right drug combination for you while trying to keep unwanted effects to a minimum. In most cases, medical treatment for bipolar disorder must continue for life. Even when a patient feels well, it's important to resist the temptation to skip doses or stop taking the medications altogether. It's also important for patients to keep all scheduled doctor appointments.

Counseling is an important aspect of treating bipolar disorder, as it can help the patient and his or her loved ones understand and cope with the disease. Through therapy, the patient may be able to better identify patterns that lead to manic or depressive episodes and make changes to reduce their occurrence. Family and friends should also pay close attention to changes in the patient's body or behavior that may signal an oncoming episode.

Ask your doctor about local support groups for people who are coping with the disease or visit the web site of the National Alliance on Mental Illness (www.nami.org) and click on "Find Support." ●

FEDERAL PRACTITIONER

A PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL FOR HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS OF THE VA, DoD, AND PHS

7 Century Drive, Suite 302
Parsippany, NJ 07054-4609