

# BIPOLAR MOOD DISORDER

## Definition

Bipolar mood disorder — sometimes called manic-depressive disorder — is associated with mood swings that range from the lows of depression to the highs of mania. When you become depressed, you may feel sad or hopeless and lose interest or pleasure in most activities. When your mood shifts in the other direction, you may feel euphoric and full of energy. Mood shifts may occur only a few times a year, or as often as several times a day. In some cases, bipolar mood disorder causes symptoms of depression and mania at the same time.

Although bipolar mood disorder is a disruptive, long-term condition, you can keep your moods in check by following a treatment plan. In most cases, bipolar mood disorder can be controlled with medications and psychological counseling (psychotherapy).

## Symptoms

Bipolar mood disorder is divided into several subtypes. Each has a different pattern of symptoms. Types of bipolar mood disorder include:

- **Bipolar I disorder:** Mood swings with bipolar I cause significant difficulty in your job, school or relationships. Manic episodes can be severe and dangerous.
- **Bipolar II disorder:** Bipolar II is less severe than bipolar I. You may have an elevated mood, irritability and some changes in your functioning, but generally you can carry on with your normal daily routine. Instead of full-blown mania, you have hypomania — a less severe form of mania. In bipolar II, periods of depression typically last longer than periods of hypomania.
- **Cyclothymic disorder:** Cyclothymic disorder, also known as cyclothymia, is a mild form of bipolar mood disorder. With cyclothymia, hypomania and depression can be disruptive, but the highs and lows are not as severe as they are with other types of bipolar mood disorder.

The exact symptoms of bipolar mood disorder vary from person to person. For some people, depression causes the most problems; for other people, manic symptoms are the main concern. Symptoms of depression and symptoms of mania or hypomania may also occur together. This is known as a mixed episode.

### When to see a doctor

See your doctor/ mental health provider if you have signs and symptoms that commonly occur in people with Bipolar mood disorder, such as:

Depression

- Sadness
- Hopelessness

- Irritability
- Suicidal thoughts or behavior
- Anxiety
- Sleep problems
- Low appetite or increased appetite
- Chronic pain without a known cause
- Fatigue
- Loss of interest in activities once considered enjoyable
- Frequent absences from work or school
- Poor performance at work or school
- Problems concentrating

### Mania

- Euphoria
- Inflated self-esteem
- Poor judgment
- Rapid speech
- Aggressive behavior
- Agitation or irritation
- Increased physical activity
- Risky behavior
- Spending sprees or unwise financial choices
- Increased drive to perform or achieve goals
- Decreased need for sleep
- Easily distracted
- Careless or dangerous use of drugs or alcohol
- Frequent absences from work or school
- Delusions or a break from reality (psychosis)

If you're reluctant to seek treatment, confide in a friend or loved one, a health care professional, a faith leader or someone else you trust. They may be able to help you take the first steps to successful treatment.

## Causes

The exact cause of bipolar mood disorder is unknown, but several factors seem to be involved in causing and triggering bipolar episodes:

- **Biological differences:** People with bipolar mood disorder appear to have physical changes in their brains. The significance of these changes is still uncertain but may eventually help pinpoint causes.
- **Neurotransmitters:** An imbalance in naturally occurring brain chemicals called neurotransmitters seems to play a significant role in bipolar mood disorder and other mood disorders.
- **Hormones:** Imbalanced hormones may be involved in causing or triggering bipolar mood disorder.

- **Inherited traits:** Bipolar mood disorder is more common in people who have a blood relative (such as a sibling or parent) with the condition. Researchers are trying to find genes that may be involved in causing bipolar mood disorder.
- **Environment:** Stress, abuse, significant loss or other traumatic experiences may play a role in bipolar mood disorder.

## Risk Factors

Factors that may increase the risk of developing bipolar mood disorder include:

- Being in your early 20s
  - Drug or alcohol abuse
  - Periods of high stress
  - Having blood relatives such as a parent or sibling with bipolar mood disorder
  - Major life changes, such as the death of a loved one
- Conditions that commonly occur with bipolar mood disorder.

If you have bipolar mood disorder, you may also have another health condition that's diagnosed before or after your diagnosis of bipolar mood disorder. Such conditions need to be diagnosed and treated because they may worsen existing bipolar mood disorder. They include:

- **Anxiety disorders:** Examples include post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social phobia and generalized anxiety disorder.
- **Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD):** ADHD has symptoms that overlap with bipolar mood disorder. For this reason, bipolar mood disorder can be difficult to differentiate from ADHD. Sometimes one is mistaken for the other. In some cases, a person may be diagnosed with both conditions.
- **Addiction or substance abuse:** Many people with bipolar mood disorder also have alcohol, tobacco or drug problems. Drugs or alcohol may seem to ease symptoms, but they can trigger, prolong or worsen depression or mania.
- **Physical health problems:** People diagnosed with bipolar mood disorder are more likely to have certain other health problems, including heart disease, thyroid problems and obesity.

## Complications

Left untreated, bipolar mood disorder can result in serious problems that affect every area of your life. These can include:

- Problems related to substance and alcohol abuse
- Financial problems
- Relationship troubles
- Isolation and loneliness
- Poor work or school performance
- Frequent absences from work or school
- Suicide
- Legal problems

## Tests and diagnosis

When doctors suspect someone has bipolar mood disorder, they typically do a number of tests and exams. These can help rule out other problems, pinpoint a diagnosis and check for any related complications.

These can include:

- **Physical exam:** This may involve measuring your height and weight; checking your vital signs, such as heart rate, blood pressure and temperature; listening to your heart and lungs; and examining your abdomen.
- **Lab tests:** These may include blood and urine tests. These tests can help identify any physical problems that could be causing your symptoms.
- **Psychological evaluation:** A doctor or mental health provider will talk to you about your thoughts, feelings and behavior patterns. You may also fill out a psychological self-assessment or questionnaire. With your permission, family members or close friends may be asked to provide information about your symptoms and possible episodes of mania or depression.
- **Mood charting:** To identify exactly what's going on, your doctor may have you keep a daily record of your moods, sleep patterns or other factors that could help with diagnosis and finding the right treatment.
- **Signs and symptoms:** Your doctor or mental health professional typically will compare your symptoms with the criteria for bipolar and related disorders in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders to determine a diagnosis.

## Diagnostic criteria for bipolar mood disorder

To be diagnosed with bipolar mood disorder, you must meet the criteria spelled out in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). This manual is published by the American Psychiatric Association and is used by mental health providers to diagnose mental conditions and by insurance companies to reimburse for treatment. Diagnostic criteria for bipolar mood disorder are based on the specific type of bipolar mood disorder.

- **Bipolar I disorder:** You've had at least one manic or one mixed episode. You may or may not have had a major depressive episode. Because bipolar I vary from person to person, there are more-specific subcategories of diagnosis based on your particular signs and symptoms.
- **Bipolar II disorder:** You've had at least one major depressive episode and at least one hypomanic episode (but not a fully manic or mixed episode). With bipolar II, symptoms cause distress or difficulty in some area of your life — such as relationships or work. Bipolar II disorder also has subcategories based on your particular signs and symptoms.
- **Cyclothymic disorder:** You've had numerous hypomanic episodes and periods of depression — but you've never had a full manic episode, a major depressive episode or a mixed episode. For a diagnosis of cyclothymic disorder, symptoms last two years or more (one year in children and adolescents). During that time, symptoms never go away for more than two months. Symptoms cause significant distress or difficulty in some area of your life — such as in relationships or at work.

## Diagnosis in children

The same official criteria used to diagnose bipolar mood disorder in adults are used to diagnose children and adolescents. However, bipolar symptoms in children and adolescents often have different patterns than they do in adults, and may not fit neatly into the categories used for diagnosis. While adults generally tend to have distinct periods of mania and depression, children and adolescents may have erratic, rapid changes in mood, behavior and energy levels.

It's often hard to tell whether these are normal ups and downs, the results of stress or trauma, or signs of a mental health problem other than bipolar mood disorder. To make it even more difficult, children who have bipolar mood disorder are frequently also diagnosed with other mental health conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or behavior problems.

Although bipolar mood disorder can occur in young children, diagnosis in children, preschool age or younger, is especially difficult. The current criteria used for diagnosis have not been proved in young children, and a wide range of issues other than bipolar mood disorder can cause mood and behavior problems at this age.

## Treatments and drugs

Treatment is best guided by a psychiatrist skilled in treating bipolar and related disorders. You may have a treatment team that also includes a psychologist, social worker and psychiatric nurse.

Depending on your needs, treatment may include:

- **Initial treatment:** Often, you'll need to begin taking medications to balance your moods right away. Once your symptoms are under control, you'll work with your doctor to find the best long-term treatment.
- **Continued treatment:** Maintenance treatment is used to manage bipolar mood disorder on a long-term basis. People who skip maintenance treatment are at high risk of a relapse of symptoms or having minor mood changes turn into full-blown mania or depression.
- **Day treatment programs:** Your doctor may recommend a day treatment program. These programs provide the support and counseling you need while you get symptoms under control.
- **Substance abuse treatment:** If you have problems with alcohol or drugs, you'll also need substance abuse treatment. Otherwise, it can be very difficult to manage bipolar mood disorder.
- **Hospitalisation:** Your doctor may recommend hospitalisation if you're behaving dangerously, you feel suicidal or you become detached from reality (psychotic). Getting psychiatric treatment at a hospital can help keep you calm and safe and stabilize your mood, whether you're having a manic or major depressive episode.

The primary treatments for bipolar disorder include medications and psychological counseling (psychotherapy), and may include education and support groups.

## Medications

A number of medications are used to treat bipolar disorder. The types and doses of medications prescribed are based on your particular symptoms.

Medications may include:

- Mood stabilisers
- Antipsychotics
- Antidepressants
- Antidepressant-antipsychotic
- Anti-anxiety medications

## Side effects

Talk to your doctor or mental health provider about side effects. If side effects seem intolerable, you may be tempted to stop taking your medication or to reduce your dose on your own. Don't do it. You may experience withdrawal effects or your symptoms may return.

Side effects often improve as you find the right medications and doses that work for you, and your body adjusts to the medications.

## Finding the right medication

Finding the right medication or medications for you will likely take some trial and error. This requires patience, as some medications need weeks to months to take full effect. Generally, only one medication is changed at a time so your doctor can identify which medications work to relieve your symptoms with the least bothersome side effects. This can take months or longer, and medications may need to be adjusted as your symptoms change. Side effects improve as you find the right medications and doses that work for you, and your body adjusts to the medications.

## Medications and pregnancy

A number of medications for bipolar mood disorder can be associated with birth defects. Discuss these issues with your doctor:

- **Birth control options,** as birth control medications may lose effectiveness when taken along with certain bipolar disorder medications.
- **Treatment options if you plan to become pregnant.**
- **Breast-feeding,** as some bipolar medications can pass through breast milk to your infant.

## Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is another vital part of bipolar mood disorder treatment. Several types of therapy may be helpful. These include:

- **Cognitive behavioral therapy:** This is a common form of individual therapy for bipolar mood disorder. The focus of cognitive behavioral therapy is identifying unhealthy, negative beliefs and behaviors and replacing them with healthy, positive ones. It can help identify what triggers your bipolar episodes. You also learn effective strategies to manage stress and to cope with upsetting situations.
- **Psycho education:** Counseling to help you learn about bipolar mood disorder (psycho education) can help you and your loved ones understand bipolar mood disorder. Knowing what's going on can help you get the best support and treatment, and help you and your loved ones recognize warning signs of mood swings.

- **Family therapy:** Family therapy involves seeing a psychologist or other mental health provider along with your family members. Family therapy can help identify and reduce stress within your family. It can help your family learn how to communicate better, solve problems and resolve conflicts.
- **Group therapy:** Group therapy provides a forum to communicate with and learn from others in a similar situation. It may also help build better relationship skills.
- **Other therapies:** Other therapies that have been studied with some evidence of success include early identification and therapy for worsening symptoms (prodrome detection) and therapy to identify and resolve problems with your daily routine and interpersonal relationships (interpersonal and social rhythm therapy). Ask your doctor if any of these options may be appropriate for you.

### Other treatment options

Depending on your needs, other treatments may be added to your depression therapy, such as:

- **Electro-convulsive therapy (ECT):** In ECT, electrical currents are passed through the brain. This procedure is thought to affect levels of neurotransmitters in your brain and typically offers immediate relief of even severe depression when other treatments don't work. Physical side effects, such as headache, are tolerable. Some people also have memory loss, which is usually temporary. ECT is usually used for people who don't get better with medications, can't take antidepressants for health reasons or are at high risk of suicide. ECT may be an option if you have mania or severe depression when you're pregnant and cannot take your regular medications.
- **Transcranial magnetic stimulation:** TMS may be an option for those who haven't responded to antidepressants. During TMS, you sit in a reclining chair with a treatment coil placed against your scalp. The coil sends brief magnetic pulses to stimulate nerve cells in your brain that are involved in mood regulation and depression. Typically, you'll have five treatments each week for up to six weeks.

### Treatment in children and teenagers

Treatments for children and teenagers are generally decided on a case-by-case basis, depending on symptoms, medication side effects and other factors.

- **Medications:** Children and teens with bipolar disorder are often prescribed the same types of medications as those used in adults. There's less research on the safety and effectiveness of bipolar medications in children than in adults, so treatment decisions are often based on adult research.
- **Psychotherapy:** Most children diagnosed with bipolar disorder require counseling as part of initial treatment and to keep symptoms from returning. Psychotherapy can help children develop coping skills, address learning difficulties, resolve social problems, and help strengthen family bonds and communication. And, if needed, it can help treat substance abuse problems, common in older children with bipolar disorder.

- **Support;** Working with teachers and school counselors and encouraging support from family and friends can help identify services and encourage success.

## Lifestyle and home remedies

You'll probably need to make lifestyle changes to stop cycles of behavior that worsen your bipolar mood disorder, and to make sure you get the support you need from people in your life. Here are some steps to take:

- **Quit drinking or using illegal drugs:** One of the biggest concerns with bipolar disorder is the negative consequences of risk-taking behavior and drug or alcohol abuse. Get help if you have trouble quitting on your own.
- **Steer clear of unhealthy relationships;** Surround yourself with people who are a positive influence and won't encourage unhealthy behavior or attitudes that can worsen your bipolar disorder.
- **Get regular physical activity and exercise:** Moderate, regular physical activity and exercise can help steady your mood. Working out releases brain chemicals that make you feel good (endorphins), can help you sleep and has a number of other benefits. Check with your doctor before starting any exercise program, especially if you're taking lithium, to make sure exercise won't interfere with your medication.
- **Get plenty of sleep:** Don't stay up all night. Instead, get plenty of sleep. Sleeping enough is an important part of managing your mood. If you have trouble sleeping, talk to your doctor or mental health provider about what you can do.

## Alternative medicine

Some alternative treatments may help, but there isn't much research on them. Most of the studies that do exist are on major depression, so it isn't clear how well most of these work for bipolar mood disorder.

- **Omega-3 fatty acids:** These oils may help improve brain function and depression associated with bipolar mood disorder. Bipolar mood disorder appears to be less common in areas of the world where people regularly eat fish rich in omega-3s. Omega-3s appear to have several health benefits, but more studies are needed to determine just how much they help with bipolar mood disorder.
- **Magnesium:** Several small studies have suggested that magnesium supplements may lessen mania and the rapid cycling of bipolar symptoms. More research is needed to confirm these findings.
- **St. John's wort:** This herb may be helpful with depression. However, it can also interact with antidepressants and other medications, and it has the potential to trigger mania in some people.
- **S-adenosyl-L-methionine (SAMe):** This amino acid supplement appears to help brain function related to depression. It isn't clear yet whether it's helpful in people with bipolar mood disorder. As with St. John's wort, SAMe can trigger mania in some people.

- **Herbal combinations:** Herbal remedies that combine several different herbs, such as those used in traditional Chinese medicine, haven't been well studied. Some appear to help, but the risks and benefits still aren't clear.
- **Acupuncture:** This ancient Chinese practice of inserting tiny needles into the skin may relieve depression, but more studies are needed to confirm its benefits. However, it won't hurt for you to try it — acupuncture is safe and can be done along with other bipolar mood disorder treatments. If you choose to use complementary medicine in addition to your physician-recommended treatment, take some precautions first:
- **Don't stop taking your prescribed medications or skip therapy sessions:** Alternative medicine is not a substitute for regular medical care when it comes to treating bipolar mood disorder.
- **Be honest with your doctors and mental health providers:** Tell them exactly which complementary treatments you use or would like to try.
- **Be aware of potential dangers:** Just because it's natural doesn't mean it's safe. Before using alternative medicine, be sure you know the risks, including possible interactions with medications.

## Coping and support

Coping with bipolar mood disorder can be challenging. Here are some things that can help:

- **Learn about bipolar mood disorder:** Education about your condition can empower you and motivate you to stick to your treatment plan. Likewise, help educate your family and friends about what you're going through.
- **Join a support group:** Support groups for people with bipolar mood disorder can help you connect to others facing similar challenges and share experiences.
- **Stay focused on your goals:** Recovery from bipolar mood disorder can take time. Stay motivated by keeping your recovery goals in mind and reminding yourself that you can work to repair damaged relationships and other problems caused by your mood swings.
- **Find healthy outlets:** Explore healthy ways to channel your energy, such as hobbies, exercise and recreational activities.
- **Learn ways to relax and manage stress:** Yoga, tai chi, meditation or other relaxation techniques can be helpful. There's no sure way to prevent bipolar mood disorder. However, getting treatment at the earliest sign of a mental health disorder can help prevent bipolar mood disorder or other mental health conditions from worsening.

## Prevention

There's no sure way to prevent bipolar mood disorder. However, getting treatment at the earliest sign of a mental health disorder can help prevent bipolar mood disorder or other mental health conditions from worsening.

If you've been diagnosed with bipolar mood disorder, some strategies can help prevent minor episodes from becoming full-blown episodes of mania or depression:

- **Pay attention to warning signs:** Addressing symptoms early on can prevent episodes from getting worse. You and your caregivers may have identified a pattern to your bipolar episodes and what triggers them. Call your doctor if you feel you're falling into an episode of depression or mania. Involve family members or friends in watching for warning signs.
- **Avoid drugs and alcohol:** Even though you may initially feel better, using alcohol or street drugs makes your symptoms more likely to come back.
- **Take your medications exactly as directed:** Medications can have unwanted side effects, and you may feel unhappy about having a mental health condition that requires lifelong treatment. During periods when you feel better, you may be tempted to stop treatment.
- **This can have immediate consequences — you may become very depressed, feel suicidal, or go into a manic or hypomanic episode.** If you think you need to make a change, call your doctor.
- **Check first before taking other medications:** Call the doctor who's treating you for bipolar mood disorder before you take medications prescribed by another doctor. Sometimes other medications trigger episodes of bipolar mood disorder or may interfere with medications you're already taking to treat bipolar mood disorder.

*Source: The Mayo Clinic*

## Contact us

Please feel free to contact your Aon Healthcare Consultant if you have any concerns. You may also contact the **Aon Resolution Centre on 0860 835 272 or e-mail: [arc@aon.co.za](mailto:arc@aon.co.za)** for further information.

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