

Bipolar Disorder

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, about 5.7 million American adults have bipolar disorder in any given year, and the illness affects men and women equally. Bipolar disorder, or manic depression, is a medical illness that causes extreme shifts in mood, energy, and functioning. Bipolar disorder is a life-long condition with recurring episodes of mania (overly “high”, energetic, and irritable mood) and depression (sad and hopeless mood) that can last from days to months. Bipolar disorder often begins in adolescence or early adulthood, and occasionally even in childhood. While medication is one key element in successful treatment of bipolar disorder, therapy, education, and support are also essential components of the treatment process.

Symptoms of a Manic Episode

- 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

Symptoms of a Depressive Episode

- 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)

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.

Treatment of Bipolar Disorder

While there is no cure for bipolar disorder, it is a treatable and manageable illness. Medication is an essential element of successful treatment for people with bipolar disorder. In addition, therapy, education, and support are important to help people understand the illness and to gain the skills needed to cope with the stresses that can trigger episodes.

Medications: Medications known as mood stabilizers usually are prescribed on a long-term basis to help control bipolar disorder. Then, other medications are added when necessary, typically for shorter periods, to treat manic episodes or depressive episodes that break through despite the mood stabilizer.

A patient with bipolar disorder must monitor his or her symptoms and visit a psychiatrist on a regular basis. The patient must also remain on medications even during well times.

Therapy, Education, and Support: Therapy, education, and support are useful in treating bipolar disorder. Patients and their family members need to understand the illness and learn to recognize triggers and symptoms so that the patient can seek intervention before a full-blown illness episode occurs. For additional education and support, patients and families can contact the resources below.

Resources

National Alliance on Mental Illness
www.nami.org ~ (812) 423-4333

Mental Health America
www.nmha.org ~ (812) 426-2640

National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov