

What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is a persistent illness with recurring episodes of mania and depression that can last from one day to months. A manic state can be identified by feelings of extreme irritability and/or euphoria, and during an episode of mania several other symptoms can occur at the same time, such as agitation, surges of energy, reduced need for sleep, talkativeness, pleasure seeking and increased risk-taking behavior. The other state, depression, produces feelings of extreme sadness, hopelessness and lack of energy. Not everyone's symptoms are the same and the severity of mania and depression can vary.

More than 10 million Americans have bipolar disorder. Because of its irregular patterns, bipolar disorder is often hard to diagnose. Although the illness can occur at any point in life, more than one-half of all cases begin between ages 15 to 25. Bipolar disorder affects men and women equally.

How is bipolar disorder diagnosed?

As with all types of illness, a doctor must be seen to provide a proper diagnosis. Unfortunately, there is no simple blood test or brain scan that identifies bipolar disorder. The doctor will rule out other causes such as a hyperthyroidism. If other medical conditions are not diagnosed, a mental health professional such as a psychiatrist needs to be consulted.

A psychiatrist diagnoses bipolar disorder using the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*, and observing a spectrum of symptoms.

Symptoms of mania can include:

- Feeling overly happy for an extended period of time.
- An abnormally increased level of irritability.
- Overconfidence or an extremely inflated self-esteem.
- Increased talkativeness.
- Decreased amount of sleep.
- Engaging in risky behavior, such as spending sprees and impulsive sex.
- Racing thoughts, jumping quickly from one idea to another.
- Easily distractible.
- Feeling agitated or “jumpy.”

Symptoms of depression can include:

- Diminished capacity for pleasure or loss of interest in activities once enjoyed.

- A long period of feeling hopeless, helpless or low self-esteem.
- Decreased amount of energy, feeling constantly tired.
- Inability to concentrate and make simple decisions.
- Changes in eating, sleeping or other daily habits.
- Being agitated or slowed down in movement, speech or thought.
- Thoughts of death or suicide attempts.

The states of mania and depression can occur in distinct episodes or can switch rapidly, even multiple times in one week. A person who is experiencing a severe bipolar episode may also have psychotic symptoms such as hallucinations or delusions.

What are the treatments for bipolar disorder?

Recognition and diagnosis of the disorder in its earliest stages is important so effective treatment can begin. Effective treatment plans usually include medication, psychotherapy, education, self-management strategies and external supports such as family, friends and formal support groups.

Medication is often effective in the stabilization and treatment of bipolar disorder. However, not everyone responds to medications in the same way, and at times, multiple types of medication must be assessed. Medications used to treat bipolar disorder often include mood-stabilizing medications and some second-generation antipsychotics. For the most up-to-date information on use and side effects, contact the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) at www.fda.gov.

Psychotherapy and self-care interventions are essential components in the treatment of bipolar disorder. Most useful psychotherapies generally focus on understanding the illness, learning how to cope and changing ineffective patterns of thinking. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is one popular example.

Family-focused therapy involves family members or friends in supportive roles. They participate by learning about the illness, and in developing and supporting a recovery.

What does recovery look like?

The recovery journey is unique for each individual. There are several definitions of recovery and all involve hope and strengths. The most important principle of recovery is this: *recovery is a process, not an event*. The uniqueness and individual nature of recovery must be honored.

Reviewed by Ken Duckworth, M.D., April 2013