

# Bipolar Disorder

## What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is an illness that causes extreme mood swings. This condition is also called manic-depressive illness. It may be caused by a chemical imbalance in the brain.

Bipolar disorder sometimes runs in the family. If you have a parent with bipolar disorder, you have more of a chance of getting it too. Both men and women get bipolar disorder. All age groups can get it.

## What are some of the signs of bipolar disorder?

You may feel very happy, full of energy, and able to do anything. You might not even want to rest when you feel this way. This feeling is called mania (say: may-knee-ah). Later on, you may feel very sad and depressed. You may not want to do anything when you feel this way. This is called depression.

Bipolar disorder has many other signs:

- Feeling very irritable or angry
- Thinking and talking so fast that other people can't follow your thoughts
- Sleeping too much or not sleeping at all
- Feeling very powerful and important
- Having trouble concentrating
- Having thoughts of suicide or death
- Spending too much money
- Abusing alcohol and drugs
- Having sex without being careful to avoid pregnancy or disease

## How is bipolar disorder treated?

Bipolar disorder is treated with medicine to stop the mood swings. Medicine helps even out your highs and lows.

When mania is the problem, mood stabilizers are used to even out your highs and lows. These medicines include:

- Lithium (brand name: Eskalith)
- Carbamazepine (brand name: Tegretol)
- Valproic acid (brand name: Depakene)

When depression is the problem, an antidepressant medicine is used.

Your doctor may add other medicines as you need them. These medicines don't start to work right away. Be sure to take your medicines just as your doctor tells you. You will start to see a difference in your moods after a few weeks.

Bipolar disorder can be treated by your family doctor. At first, your family doctor may want you to see a psychiatrist, too. You and your doctors will work together to control your mood swings and make sure you stay well.

Counseling can help you with stress, family concerns and relationship problems. It's important to get counseling if you have bipolar disorder.

## What can I do to help myself get better?

- Read about bipolar disorder and teach your family what you learn. Your doctor can suggest reading material and videotapes.



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## Bipolar Disorder *(continued)*

- It helps to live a stable life. Go to bed and wake up at about the same time every day. Eat your meals and exercise at regular times.
- Take your medicine every day, and don't stop taking it when you are feeling better. Avoid caffeine and over-the-counter medicines for colds, allergies and pain. Talk with your doctor before you drink alcohol or use any other medicines.
- Try to avoid stress.
- Learn the early warning signs of your illness. Tell your doctor when you notice changes.
- Join a local support group. You and your family can share information and experiences with the support group.

*Some information in this handout comes from the Steering Committee. Treatment of bipolar disorder. The Expert Consensus Guideline Series. J Clin Psychiatry 1996;57(suppl 12A):3-88.*

### Where can I get more information about bipolar disorder?

You can learn more about bipolar disorder from the following groups:

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill  
Telephone: 1-800-950-6264  
Web address: <http://www.nami.org>

National Foundation for Depressive Illness  
Telephone: 1-800-248-4344  
Web address: <http://www.depression.org>

National Mental Health Association  
Telephone: 1-800-969-6642  
Web address: <http://www.nmha.org>

You can also read books written by people who have bipolar disorder. Here are two:

- **A Brilliant Madness: Living with Manic-Depressive Illness**, by Patty Duke and Gloria Hockman (published by Bantam Books, 1992; reissued in paperback, 1993).
- **An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness**, by Kay Redfield Jamison (published by Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).

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