

Bipolar Disorder

People with bipolar disorder have cycling episodes of “mania” (overexcitedness, overactivity) and depression. The cycles may occur very rapidly, especially in children. Long-term treatment, including medications, can help to stabilize your child’s mood and permit a normal, productive life.

What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is a type of mental illness. Your child may have periods in which he or she is very “high,” with excited behavior, constant talking, and unrealistic plans. These are followed by periods in which he or she is very “low”: depressed and sad, with low energy. An old term for this condition is “manic-depression.”

The pattern varies for every patient—your child may have other symptoms as well. Fortunately, medications known as mood stabilizers are very helpful for bipolar disorder. Getting treatment will help your child feel better and improve his or her performance in school, relationships, and other important areas of life.

What does it look like?

- Mood swings that are often rapid and unpredictable.
- During manic episodes, your child may act excited and energetic. He or she may talk rapidly and constantly, sometimes without making sense. Your child may make grand plans and talk as if he or she is very important. Other symptoms may include spending sprees, sexual promiscuousness, or hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that aren’t there).
- During depressed episodes, your child may be sad, listless, and hopeless. He or she may have trouble sleeping, yet stay in bed all day. Your child may worry a lot about problems, real and imagined, and neglect school and other activities or responsibilities.
- Some children have angry or aggressive behavior. They may be diagnosed with other disorders, such as attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or conduct disorder.
- Behavior problems can lead to trouble at school and in relationships. Children may abuse drugs and alcohol and get in trouble with the police.

What causes bipolar disorder?

The cause is unknown. If you or others in your family have had anxiety or depression, your child may be more likely to develop mood disorders.

What are some possible complications of bipolar disorder?

- Bipolar disorder can be difficult to manage for your child and those around him or her. It can lead to problems in school, relationships, and other areas of life.
- If it is severe or left untreated, bipolar disorder can lead to serious consequences, such as job and relationship difficulties, legal troubles, or suicide.

Can bipolar disorder be prevented?

There is no way to prevent bipolar disorder.

How is bipolar disorder treated?

- Getting the correct diagnosis is an important first step. Evaluation by a psychiatrist or other mental health professional is essential in recognizing and getting effective treatment for bipolar disorder.
- A child and adolescent psychiatrist or other mental health specialist will probably direct your child’s treatment. This professional has the training and experience to recommend the best care for your child’s situation.
- Treatment usually includes mood-stabilizing drugs. These medications can help to make your child’s mood swings less severe, allowing him or her to get back to normal activities.
- The most common medication is lithium carbonate. It can have a number of side effects, so your child will need follow-up blood tests.
- Other drugs, including Tegretol (generic name: carbamazepine), Depakene (generic name: valproic acid), or Lamictal (generic name: lamotrigine) may be used. These also carry a risk of side effects and require close monitoring.
- Your child may have to continue taking mood stabilizers or other recommended medications indefinitely. Going off medications can cause a return of bipolar symptoms or a relapse. If a relapse occurs even when your child is taking medication, a change in treatment may be needed.
- Psychotherapy or counseling from a mental health professional can help your child to cope with daily stresses and aid in keeping bipolar symptoms under control.

When should I call your office?

- During treatment for bipolar disorder, call your mental health provider if your child seems to be having mood swings—feeling either too high or too low.

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- Call your mental health provider if your child develops any medication side effects, such as a rash, confusion, drowsiness, or behavior changes.
- If you cannot reach your mental health provider and you're concerned about these or other problems, call our office.