



Patient education: Bipolar disorder (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is a brain disorder that causes extreme changes in mood and behavior. People sometimes call it "manic depression."

Bipolar disorder is caused by problems with chemicals in the brain called "neurotransmitters." Bipolar disorder can run in families.

What are the symptoms of bipolar disorder?

People with bipolar disorder can feel much happier or much sadder than normal. If you have bipolar disorder, you might feel very happy for several days and then feel very sad.

When your mood is very happy, this can also come with other symptoms. Doctors use the term "mania" or "manic episodes." You might:

- Get angry quickly
- Be more active than normal
- Feel like you have special powers
- Feel like you don't need sleep
- Make poor choices without thinking
- Start lots of things and not finish them

Other times, you might have symptoms of depression. Doctors use the term "depressive episodes." You might:

- Be very sad for most of the day, every day
- Lose or gain a lot of weight

- Have trouble falling asleep or sleep too much
- Feel very tired
- Not enjoy things
- Feel bad about yourself
- Think about death or hurting yourself

People with bipolar disorder might have trouble at work or school. It can also be hard to get along well with family and friends.

Is there a test for bipolar disorder?

No. There is no test. But your doctor or nurse should be able to tell if you have it by talking with you and your family. They will ask about your mood and what you have been feeling and doing.

Your doctor or nurse might also do an exam and order blood tests to check for other problems.

Get help right away if you are thinking of hurting or killing yourself!

If you ever feel like you might hurt yourself or someone else, help is available:

- In the US, contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:
 - To speak to someone, call or text **988**.
 - To talk to someone online, go to www.988lifeline.org/chat.
 - Call your doctor or nurse, and tell them it is urgent.
 - Call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, call 9-1-1).
 - Go to the emergency department at the nearest hospital.
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How is bipolar disorder treated?

The main treatment for bipolar disorder is medicine. You and your doctor will work together to find the medicine that works best for you. Medicines sometimes take a while to start working. It can also take a few tries to find the right medicine or combination of medicines.

All of the medicines for bipolar disorder affect the brain. They can:

- Keep your mood stable and prevent big mood changes

- Calm your mind
- Make your sadness go away

Medicines sometimes cause side effects.

You might also need to stay in the hospital for a short time. When a bipolar disorder mood episode starts, you might be at risk of hurting yourself or others. You might hear voices that other people do not hear. You might believe things that are not true. But if you are at the hospital, the doctors can treat these symptoms and keep you safe.

In addition to medicine, other treatments might include:

- Electroconvulsive therapy ("ECT") – For this treatment, doctors pass an electric current through a person's brain in a safe way. This causes chemical changes in the brain that relieve severe depression. Some people whose bipolar disorder makes them feel very sad might need ECT to get better.
- Psychotherapy (counseling) – This involves meeting with a therapist to talk about your feelings, thoughts, and life. There are different types of psychotherapy. In general, they all focus on helping you learn new ways of thinking and behaving, so that you can better cope with your bipolar disorder.

After getting treatment for an episode, most people with bipolar disorder continue to take medicine every day. This can help prevent big changes in your mood and behavior.

What if I want to get pregnant?

If you want to try to get pregnant, talk with your doctor. Some medicines for bipolar disorder are OK to take during pregnancy. Others are not. You might need to slowly reduce or change your medicine.

What will my life be like?

Many people with bipolar disorder are able to live normal lives. It can help to remember that bipolar disorder is a medical condition, and there are treatments that can help.

If you have bipolar disorder:

- See your doctor regularly. Follow all of their instructions about taking your medicine and going to therapy. This is important even when you are feeling good.

- Pay attention to how you feel each day. Get help **right away** if your symptoms change or get worse, or if you are struggling.
- If you have problems with alcohol or drugs, tell your doctor or nurse. They can help.
- Find healthy ways to cope with stress.
- Eat healthy foods, and get regular physical activity.

More on this topic

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Patient education: Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) (The Basics)

Patient education: Bipolar disorder (Beyond the Basics)

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