

## What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is a treatable illness in which a person experiences extreme mood swings and activity levels. These are different from the usual ups and downs that everyone feels because they cause serious impairment in function.

Usually, sufferers have both “manic episodes”, with a high mood and increased levels of energy and activity, and “depressed episodes” in which their mood is low and their energy and activity levels drop.

Some people with bipolar disorder only experience manic episodes with no depression.

## Common signs and symptoms of bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder involves episodes of mania and depression. Symptoms that happen over a certain period are called “episodes”.

### Manic episodes

Features or symptoms of a manic episode include:

- elevated mood – “feeling on top of the world” – a sensation of utter happiness
- excessive irritability, anger or rage
- increased energy and/or restlessness
- increased talkativeness; talking very fast about many things
- loss of normal social inhibitions and doing risky things like spending lots of money
- decreased need for sleep
- inflated self-esteem (I can do whatever I want!)
- distractibility (not able to concentrate on any task)
- elevated sexual energy or sexual indiscretion.

### Depressed episodes

Symptoms of an episode of depression include:

- sadness
- losing interest in the things one used to enjoy
- loss of energy and fatigue
- changes in appetite and sleep – eating and sleeping too much or too little
- feeling guilty or worthless
- low self-esteem
- slower thinking, forgetfulness
- difficulty in concentration
- thoughts of self-harm and suicide.

For more information about depression, see WHO’s factsheet about it in this series. You can download it from the link given at the end of this leaflet.

### Psychotic symptoms

In severe cases, sufferers may also have a psychotic element, meaning that they believe in things that are not true (**delusions**) and/or think they see, hear and/or smell things that are not real (**hallucinations**). When they are depressed, they may have extreme false beliefs of feeling worthless or guilty or that a part of their body no longer exists. During mania, they may believe that they have special powers or have been blessed with a unique mission. They may hear voices talking to them or about them.

For more information, please see WHO’s factsheet on psychosis and schizophrenia.

## What causes bipolar disorder?

Men and women are equally likely to have bipolar disorder, and it can affect people from any background and at any age. However, it is most common between the ages of 15 to 35 years. The exact cause that leads to some people developing bipolar disorder is not known, but there are factors that play a part in causing the illness or triggering it. For example, bipolar disorder can run in families, so genetics has a role. It is also known that emotionally or physically

stressful life events may trigger an episode. Further episodes of mania or depression are more likely in those already affected.

## When to seek help

If you had an episode before or you think you may be susceptible to bipolar disorder, for example because you have a close family member with it, learn about the warning symptoms and seek help if you notice any relevant changes in your thoughts and or level of activity.

People experiencing a manic episode are less likely to ask for help. It is important that people around them and medical staff are aware of the condition so that they are ready to help.

Self-harm and thoughts of suicide or the threat of harming others are an emergency. During manic episodes, you may also get involved in risky behaviour and not be able to make good decisions. Again, family, friends and care givers can play an important role in keeping you safe.

## Treating bipolar disorder

People with bipolar disorder need to take medicines. Sometimes they may need to stay in hospital, if there is a possibility of their harming themselves or others.

A group of drugs called mood stabilizers such as lithium, sodium valproate and carbamazepine are used to control the manic episodes and maintain treatment of bipolar disorder. Other drugs may be used to control psychotic symptoms (antipsychotics) and to calm the person down (benzodiazepines).

Using antidepressants alone to treat a person diagnosed with bipolar disorder can trigger a manic phase. They are therefore prescribed in combination with mood stabilizers.

People being treated for bipolar disorder should contact their doctor immediately if they feel symptoms of side effects probably caused by medications. These may include nausea, fatigue and drowsiness, dizziness, double vision and tremors. The doctor will advise how to adjust the dosage or change the medication to control the side effects.

In addition, women with bipolar disorder may need to talk with their doctor about which medications are the least risky to take when trying to conceive, during pregnancy, in the postpartum period, and while nursing.

Different psychotherapeutic approaches are available. They can help people with bipolar disorder learn new coping skills to help them manage stressful life events more successfully.

The golden rules for people being treated for bipolar disorder are: never stop taking medicines even if you feel completely recovered, contact your doctor immediately if you notice warning symptoms and seek help if you have thoughts of suicide – it is an emergency.


## How can you help yourself?

Bipolar disorder is recurrent in most people who have it. You need to learn how to prevent episodes and live a fully functional life. You may find these tips helpful:

- Learn about your disease and how to spot warning symptoms with the help of your doctor or mental health care giver. Try to understand what triggers episodes and how to avoid such triggers.
- Follow a healthy life style with a regular sleep pattern, healthy eating and exercise, and avoid emotional and physical stress as much as possible.
- Find at least one person that you can rely on and confide in – someone who can warn you if you think you are not well.
- Avoid alcohol and drugs. If you drink alcohol, stick to the safe limits.

## How can you help a friend or family member who has bipolar disorder?

People who live with or give care to someone with bipolar disorder can face difficult times. During acute episodes of disorder, especially the manic episode, people with bipolar disorder may become abusive or even violent, do socially inappropriate behaviours, harm themselves or people around them, or put financial pressure



on loved ones through excessive spending. All these things make the whole family feel the strain of the disorder. There are things you can do to help yourself or your loved one with bipolar disorder:

- Be patient, try to understand their mood swings and listen to them carefully.
- Seek professional help if you feel difficulties in your relationship.
- Help your loved one follow their treatment plan and take their medication regularly.
- Share your concern with your loved one if you see warning signs of a new episode. Encourage and help them to make an appointment, and reassure them that it is possible to get better.

- Include your loved one in social and fun activities. Help them to get back to their routines as much as possible, or set new routines that put less pressure on them.
- In acute phases of disorder, ask for help if you feel there is any risk of serious consequences. You can call the doctor or emergency service for help.

*This is one of a series of factsheets produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) to give the general public more information about mental disorders and how they can be treated. You can download all the factsheets free of charge from the WHO website at: [www.emro.who.int/mnh](http://www.emro.who.int/mnh).*