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Patient information: Bipolar disorder (manic depression) (Beyond the Basics)

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OVERVIEW

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic depression, is a mental health problem that causes changes in mood. Sometimes you may feel excessively elated, impulsive, irritable, or irrational (called mania) or hypomanic (a milder form of mania). Other times you may feel excessively sad (called major depression).

Bipolar disorder can make it hard to do a good job at work or school, have relationships with friends and family, and it even increases the risk of suicide if it is not treated or treated incorrectly. However, a number of effective treatment options are available.

More detailed information about bipolar disorder is available by subscription. (See "[Bipolar disorder in adults: Epidemiology and diagnosis](#)" and "[Bipolar disorder in adults: Pharmacotherapy for acute mania, mixed episodes, and hypomania](#)" and "[Bipolar disorder in adults: Maintenance treatment](#)" and "[Bipolar disorder in adults and lithium: Pharmacology, administration, and side effects](#)".)

BIPOLAR DISORDER CAUSES

The exact cause of bipolar disorder is not clear. The problem may be related to an imbalance of chemicals in the brain. These chemicals allow cells to communicate with each other and play an essential role in all brain functions, including movement, sensation, memory, and emotions.

Approximately one percent of people have bipolar disorder. People with a family history of bipolar disorder are at increased risk of developing the condition. Most people develop the first symptoms of bipolar disorder between age 15 to 30 years; it is uncommon to develop the first symptoms of bipolar as a child or as an adult over the age of 65.

BIPOLAR DISORDER SYMPTOMS

Mania — Mania causes you to feel abnormally and persistently happy, angry, hyperactive, impulsive, and irrational at different times. These feelings last at least one week, and may be severe enough that you need to be treated in a hospital. Other symptoms may include:

- Feelings of special powers and superiority
- Decreased need for sleep, restlessness
- Talking excessively
- Increased activity

- Racing thoughts
- Short attention span
- Inappropriate laughing or joking, or getting into lots of arguments
- Inappropriate spending sprees or sexual activity

Mania often causes difficulty maintaining relationships with friends and family, and can interfere with work or other responsibilities. During a manic episode, your moods can change rapidly from euphoria to depression or irritability.

Hypomania — Hypomania is less severe than mania, but it causes a change in mood that is abnormal. Hypomania is usually briefer than manic episodes, although it lasts for at least four days. Hypomania may not seriously affect your ability to work or go to school, and some people actually function better during a hypomanic episode. Hypomania may not need to be treated in a hospital, but it should be treated with medicines because it may lead to a manic or depressive episode.

Depression — People with depression feel very sad and have trouble doing ordinary things like bathing, getting dressed, and cooking. You may feel sad most of the day or you may have little or no interest in any activity. Other symptoms may include:

- Weight loss or gain (due to changes in how much you eat)
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep, or sleeping too much
- Feeling irritated easily
- Fatigue, loss of energy, sluggishness
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Recurring thoughts of death or suicide

(See "[Patient information: Depression in adults \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)".)

Alcohol and drugs — More than 60 percent of people with bipolar disorder abuse alcohol or drugs.

Suicide — The risk of suicide also is higher in people with bipolar disorder compared to people with other psychiatric illnesses (including depression). Suicide is often the result of feeling hopeless, and is more likely in people with severe symptoms who must be hospitalized for treatment. If a family member or friend mentions suicide, you should consider this a serious threat and immediately contact the person's doctor or nurse. If you are having thoughts of suicide, call your doctor or nurse or go to the nearest emergency department.

BIPOLAR DISORDER DIAGNOSIS

There is no test that can diagnose bipolar disorder. Instead, the diagnosis is based upon a medical and psychiatric history and a physical and mental status examination. Laboratory testing may be performed to rule out other diagnoses.

TREATMENT OF MANIA IN BIPOLAR DISORDER

Treatment of mania focuses on managing symptoms and keeping you safe. In the early phase of mania (called the acute phase), you may be psychotic (having false, fixed beliefs or hearing voices or seeing things others cannot see or hear). You may not be able to make good decisions and you may be at risk of hurting yourself or others. You may need to be treated in a hospital temporarily, until your medicine begins to work.

