

# Understanding Bipolar Disorder



**B**ipolar disorder, sometimes called “manic depression,” is a condition involving cycles of mania and depression. These cycles can occur over days, weeks, and months. During a cycle, the person’s mood and behavior usually swings from mania to depression and then back again. Some manic swings can be mild. These are called episodes. There may be periods of normal mood between episodes.

## Symptoms of mania may include:

- feeling unusually “high,” happy, or irritable
- needing less sleep
- talking a lot or feeling you can’t stop talking
- being easily distracted
- having lots of different ideas go through your mind very quickly

- doing things that feel good but have bad outcomes, such as spending too much money, inappropriate sexual activity, or foolish business investments
- making lots of plans or feeling that you have to keep moving or “doing”

## Symptoms of depression may include:

- feeling sad, blue, or down in the dumps
- loss of interest in things you used to enjoy, including sex
- feeling anxious, guilty or worried
- feeling worthless, pessimistic or hopeless
- changes in appetite
- difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- trouble sleeping or sleeping too much
- loss of energy or feeling tired all of the time
- frequent thoughts about death or thoughts, plans, or attempts to commit suicide

## Who suffers from bipolar disorder?

At least 2 million Americans suffer from bipolar disorder. It may be inherited, as it tends to run in families. Bipolar disorder often begins in the teen years or in early adulthood and continues throughout life. If left untreated, bipolar disorder tends to worsen and may lead to other problems, such as alcohol or drug abuse.

## Treatment options

Several kinds of treatment are helpful in managing bipolar disorder. The goal of treatment is twofold:

1. to decrease how often you experience symptoms; and
2. to decrease the impact of the symptoms when you do experience them.

Your doctor will work with you to find the best treatment.

## Mood stabilizing medications

Medications, such as lithium, help to control mania symptoms. They also prevent manic and depressive episodes from occurring. Mood stabilizing medications can take from five days to several weeks to start working. Several medications used to treat seizures are also useful for bipolar disorder. These medications are particularly useful for people who have frequent cycles. These include valproate, carbamazepine, and other new, promising medications.

## Antipsychotic medications

Antipsychotic medications control agitation and hallucinations and can help restore rational thinking. Common antipsychotic medications recommended as good mood stabilizers are olanzapine and risperidone.

## Antidepressant medications

When used with the above medications, antidepressants can be helpful for relieving symptoms of depression. There are several types of antidepressant medications, and



each works in its own way. Ultimately, they alter the brain's chemistry so that depression is relieved.

### **Psychotherapy and education**

Psychotherapy and education are helpful in providing support and information to patients and families coping with bipolar disorder. They can help with social and emotional concerns and help patients stick with medication treatments. They can also help patients identify early symptoms of mania and depression. Psychotherapy and education may be helpful to those with bipolar disorder, but they are not a substitute for medication.

### **Support groups**

Coping with bipolar illness can be challenging and joining a support group can be helpful. In a support group, members share problems and successes and recognize that they are not alone in dealing with this condition.

### **Hospitalization**

Occasionally, symptoms of mania or depression can become so severe that a brief hospital stay may be required. During the hospitalization, medications will be adjusted to relieve symptoms.

## **Searching for the right treatments**

Most patients with bipolar disorder benefit from using medications. Sometimes it takes several tries to find the best medication or the best combination of medications. A few medications must be regularly checked through simple

blood tests. These tests show if the medication is at the proper dosage. If a medication seems not to be working, or if side effects are a serious problem, ask your doctor about alternatives.

### **Taking medications as prescribed**

Patients often want to stop taking their medications too soon. It can take four to six weeks or longer to know whether a medication is effective or not. It is important to keep taking the medication unless your doctor tells you to stop. This is true even if you feel better. Bipolar disorder tends to be a life-long illness, so most people with bipolar disorder must take medications for the rest of their lives. This is true even after years without any symptoms.

### **How to handle medication side effects**

Medication side effects can be frustrating. They may last a few days, weeks, or longer. However, there are ways to lessen side effects. Ask your doctor what side effects to expect and how to cope with them.

## **Coping with bipolar disorder**

With proper treatment, you can lead a productive and fulfilling life with bipolar disorder. If you actively work with your medical professionals, you'll get the best benefit from your treatment. Become alert to early symptoms of manic or depressive episodes. Sometimes, your family or friends may notice symptoms before you do. Ask them to tell you so you can take action early by notifying your medical professionals.

## **Call Kaiser Permanente if you . . .**

- experience serious mood swings that have not been evaluated by a medical professional
- notice an increase in depression
- notice an increase in manic symptoms
- decide to stop taking medications prescribed for treatment of bipolar disorder

## **Other resources**

### **Books**

- *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*
- *Bipolar Disorder: A Guide for Patients and Families* (1999). Francis Mark Mondimore, MD.
- *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness* (1997). Kay Redfield Jamison.
- *Living Without Depression & Manic Depression, A Workbook for Maintaining Mood Stability* (1994). Mary Ellen Copeland, M.S.

### **Web sites**

- Kaiser Permanente  
[www.kp.org](http://www.kp.org)
- National Depressive and Manic Depressive Association  
[www.ndmda.org](http://www.ndmda.org)
- National Mental Health Association  
[www.nmha.org](http://www.nmha.org)

If you think you have a medical or psychiatric emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest hospital. To better coordinate your emergency care, we recommend that you go to a Plan hospital if it is reasonable to do so considering your condition or symptoms. Please refer to Your Guidebook to Kaiser Permanente Services for the location of Plan hospitals that provide emergency care.

An emergency medical condition is a medical or psychiatric condition that manifests itself by acute symptoms of sufficient severity (including severe pain) such that you could reasonably expect the absence of immediate medical attention to result in any of the following:

- Serious jeopardy to your health
- Serious impairment to your bodily functions
- Serious dysfunction of any bodily organ or part

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have further questions, please consult your doctor. If you have questions or need further information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist.