

*Patient Education Sheet***What is Bipolar Illness and How is it Treated?****What is Bipolar illness?**

Bipolar Disorder is a serious brain illness that affects about 6 million American adults. This patient education handout will help you learn more about this illness and its treatment.

Bipolar illness is also called manic-depressive illness. People with bipolar disorder go through unusual mood changes. Sometimes they feel very happy and ‘up’ and are much more active than usual. This is called **mania**. A mild to moderate form of mania is called **hypomania**. And sometimes people with bipolar disorder feel very sad and “down” and are much less active. This is called **depression**. Bipolar disorder can also cause changes in energy and behavior.

Bipolar disorder is not the same as normal ups and downs. The symptoms are more powerful than that. They can damage relationships and make it hard to keep a job. They can also be dangerous. People with bipolar disorder may turn to drugs and alcohol to "self-treat" their illness, resulting in substance dependence. Self-medicating makes matters worse.

Anyone can develop bipolar disorder. It often starts in a person’s late teen or early adult years. But children and older adults can have bipolar disorder too. The illness usually lasts a lifetime

There is no cure for bipolar illness; however with proper treatment, symptoms can be managed like any other medical condition.

What are the symptoms of Bipolar illness?

Bipolar mood changes are called “episodes”. People may have hypomanic, manic, depressive or “mixed” episodes. A mixed episode has both manic and depressive symptoms. These mood episodes cause

symptoms that last a week or two, and sometimes longer. During an episode, the symptoms last every day for most of the day, and mood swings are intense. The feelings are strong and happen along with extreme changes in behavior and energy levels.

People having a manic episode may

- Feel very “up” or “high”
- Feel “jumpy” or “wired”
- Talk really fast about a lot of different things.
- Be agitated, irritable or “touchy”
- Have trouble sleeping or relaxing
- Do risky things, like spend a lot of money or have reckless sex
- Think they can do a lot of things at once and are more active than usual

People having a depressive episode may:

- Feel very down or sad
- Feel worried and empty
- Have trouble concentrating
- Forget things a lot
- Lose interest in fun activities and become less active
- Feel tired or slowed down
- Have trouble sleeping
- Think about death or suicide.

If a depressed person voices thoughts of suicide take them seriously and call 911 or get them to an emergency room.

What are the causes of Bipolar illness?

- Genetic, environmental and emotional factors.
- Disruption of normal chemicals in the brain
- Genes, because the illness runs in families.
- Drugs such as opioids and hallucinogens can give rise to mania.
- Stress, both physical and emotional plays a big part and also causes relapse.

What helps someone with Bipolar stay well?

Ways to stay well include:

- Reduce risk factors for relapse by avoiding stressful situations, people and events
- Avoid triggers that you recognize lead to relapse
- Structure each day
- Create regular routines
- Normalize regular sleep/wake patterns
- Remain in treatment with a trusted practitioner.
- Take your medication even when you have been well for many years
- Ensure access to emergency medications in case symptoms get worse
- Find healthy ways for dealing with sadness over chronic illness.
- Learn all you can about the illness and its usual symptoms and triggers

What is the treatment for Bipolar illness?

Right now, there is no cure for bipolar disorder. But treatment can help manage symptoms. Most people can get help with mood changes and behavior problems.

Treatment works best when it is ongoing, instead of on and off.

1. Medications. Medications for bipolar disorder are prescribed by licensed professionals--- with expertise in the diagnosis and care of mental disorders.

Medications known as **mood stabilizers** are usually prescribed. In general, people with bipolar disorder continue treatment with medications for a life time. Medications may be changed and adjusted as the patient and practitioner work together over time. Several different types of medications such as antidepressants or antipsychotic medications may be added, if needed, to treat symptoms as they arise. These medications may be stopped from time to time while the mood stabilizer remains. People respond to medication in different ways, so the type of medication depends on the patient and the episode being treated.

Medications can cause side effects. **Patients should always ask about and then tell their doctor about any problems they think they may be having as a result of a new medication.** Patients should not stop taking a medication without a doctor's help. Stopping medication suddenly can be dangerous, and it can make the symptoms worse.

2. Psycho-social therapies. Certain psychosocial therapies have been found to be successful additions to medications in maintaining wellness:

- a. Cognitive/ behavioral therapy: Encourages individuals to recognize and change distorted thinking that may contribute to symptoms.
- b. Family Focused Therapy focuses on education and counseling about the

disease, and it uses ways to reduce the level of distress within the family. Individuals need their family members to be well informed about the disorder and to have open communication among family members.

- c. Psycho-education: can be used alone or as a part of the above therapies. It provides social support and sharing of information about bipolar disorder. It helps individuals to learn to live with a chronic condition and to find ways to stay well.

These therapies have been found to:

- Help lessen symptoms
- Increase the number of months a person feels well
- Speed recovery
- Decrease the risk of relapse
- Function better overall
- Have more stable personal relationships
- Enjoy life more

The most painful burden of bipolar disorder may be depression. Researchers believe depression is the biggest predictor of disability and must be diagnosed and treated rapidly.

Work functioning is a major area of vulnerability for individuals with bipolar disorder. So far as we know now, psycho-social therapies do not seem to have any effect on a person's ability to work or take part in leisure activities. However, individuals who take part in intensive therapy function better in general.

For that reason, it is important for individual as well as family members, friends and maybe even supervisors to know about the disease. They should also know about symptoms that

may be a sign of relapse as well as symptoms that may trigger the disorder. This can help to prevent a serious decline in functioning and/or a severe relapse into a mania or a suicide.

For more information

Horblit Health Sciences Library
Danbury Hospital
Tel: 203-739-7419

The National Library of Medicine at MedlinePlus
www.medlineplus.gov

National Institute of Mental Health at
www.nimh.nih.org

Notes:

Source:

American Psychiatric Association,
DSM-IV Desk Reference
Harvard Mental Health Letter, June 2008;
National Institute of Mental Health www.nimh.nih.org

