

Frequently Asked Questions About Bipolar Disorder

Is there a test to tell me if I have, or may inherit, bipolar disorder?

Currently, no test can tell a person if he is at risk of developing bipolar disorder. It is unlikely that a single gene will be discovered that is responsible for the illness in all people with bipolar disorder.

Can someone have a medical condition that appears to be bipolar disorder but actually is something else?

Certain conditions mimic mood disorders, including bipolar disorder. Common ones are:

- thyroid conditions
- neurological diseases, such as multiple sclerosis, brain tumors, stroke or epilepsy
- infections of the brain from conditions such as HIV infection, syphilis, sleep apnea and Lyme disease
- deficiencies of certain vitamins, such as vitamin B12
- corticosteroid use, especially in high doses
- medicine used to prevent diseases like tuberculosis and AIDS

Telling your doctor about your medical history and the medications that you are currently taking can help her determine the cause of your condition.

What if someone I know has bipolar disorder?

Family members may want to express their concern by describing the specific behaviors to that person in a nonjudgmental fashion. The person with the disorder is less able to dismiss the observation if there is a consensus among friends or family members that a distinctive pattern has emerged.

At the work site, violations of safety codes or negligence may need to be reported to supervisors so that the person can receive a medical evaluation before injury or disability occurs.

If I am diagnosed with bipolar disorder, will I be on medication for the rest of my life?

Not necessarily. However, patients are encouraged to stay on medication indefinitely if an episode was very frightening or associated with great risk to their health, finances or family relationships.

Is there anything I can do to help my disorder?

Yes. First, learn all you can about your illness by reading books, going to lectures and talking to your doctor. Get support from others who also have the illness. The Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association is a good place to look for a support group in your area. In these groups, you can hear how others face the challenges of life and manage their mood and treatment medications. For helpful hints for managing your illness, see **Coping With Bipolar Disorder**.

How can lifestyle affect bipolar disorder?

Lack of a consistent routine and disrupted sleep can trigger a mood episode. Choosing work and leisure activities that allow proper sleep and rest is vital to healthy emotional functioning. Families can support good mental hygiene by going to bed and getting up at the same time each day.

What are some signs that I need to call my doctor?

As you start to recover, doctor appointments will become less frequent and usually involve monitoring your mood, and blood level of your medication, if appropriate. But you should call your doctor immediately if you experience any of the following:

- changes in mood, sleep or energy
- changes in medication side effects
- suicidal or violent feelings
- a need to use over-the-counter medications such as cold medicine or pain medicine
- any acute medical illness, surgery, extensive dental care or changes in other medications you take

How common is suicide among bipolar patients?

People with untreated bipolar disorder have an estimated suicide rate of 15 percent. As many as half the patients undergoing treatment may attempt suicide once in their life. The peak incidence of suicides occurs in May, and the second peak occurs in early fall around October.

Can stopping medication be life threatening?

Yes. A person with bipolar disorder who does not receive treatment may lose years from her life. Researchers have shown that treatment can reduce suicide rates in patients. Stopping mood-stabilizing medication abruptly can be very risky and even a matter of life and death.

What if I feel like quitting my treatment?

Stopping medication abruptly can trigger a rapid recurrence of mood symptoms. Be honest with your doctors and therapist if you feel treatment is not working or your medicine is causing unpleasant side effects. There are now close to a dozen medications available as “mood stabilizers.” Even though only lithium and Depakote® are officially U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved for use as mood stabilizers, the FDA permits reasonable use of any medication.

If you remain uncomfortable with your treatment plan, get another opinion. Consultations from other professionals can be a great help.

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