

How Do I Know If I Have, or a Loved One Has, Bipolar Disorder?

In everyday life, people have a variety of moods and feelings. These feelings include frustration, joy and anger. Usually these moods last one day rather than several days. For people with bipolar disorder, however, moods usually swing from weeks of feeling overly “high” and irritable to weeks of feeling sad and hopeless with normal periods in between.

An important distinction between bipolar disorder and the normal emotions of life is that bipolar disorder results in an inability to handle daily activities. The person cannot work or communicate effectively and may have a distorted sense of reality (for example, unrealistically high or low opinion of one’s skills).

Symptoms of bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder often is not recognized by the patient, relatives, friends or even physicians. However, recognizing the mood states that occur is essential. Treatment can help a person with bipolar disorder avoid harmful consequences such as destruction of personal relationships, job loss and suicide.

During a manic phase, symptoms include:

- heightened sense of self-importance
- exaggerated positive outlook
- significantly decreased need for sleep
- poor appetite and weight loss
- racing speech, flight of ideas, impulsiveness
- ideas that move quickly from one subject to the next
- poor concentration, easy distractibility
- increased activity level
- excessive involvement in pleasurable activities
- poor financial choices, rash spending sprees
- excessive irritability, aggressive behavior

During a depressed phase, symptoms include:

- feelings of sadness or hopelessness
- loss of interest in pleasurable or usual activities
- difficulty sleeping; early-morning awakening
- loss of energy and constant lethargy
- sense of guilt or low self-esteem
- difficulty concentrating
- negative thoughts about the future
- weight gain or weight loss
- talk of suicide or death

The main method used to diagnose bipolar disorder is a thorough interview with a psychiatrist, psychologist or other mental health professional. Although there are written methods for documenting the severity and number of symptoms, those tests only complement a complete interview. They do not substitute for a face-to-face evaluation by a professional. There are not yet any blood tests or other biological tests that can be used to diagnose bipolar disorder.

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