

# Bipolar Disorder in Adults

The average age of onset for bipolar disorder is 25 years, although the illness can start in early childhood or as late as the 40's and 50's.

\*National Institute of Mental Health

## when does bipolar disorder start?

Bipolar disorder often appears in the late teens or early adult years. At least half of all cases start before age 25. Some people have their first symptoms during childhood, while others may develop symptoms late in life.

Bipolar disorder is not easy to spot when it starts. Some people suffer for years before they are properly diagnosed and treated. Like diabetes or heart disease, bipolar disorder is a long-term illness that must be carefully managed throughout your life.

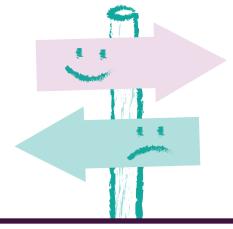
People with bipolar disorder may abuse alcohol or substances, have relationship problems, or perform poorly in school or at work. It may be difficult to recognize these problems as signs of a major mental illness.

## how can I help a loved one who has bipolar disorder?

If you know someone who has bipolar disorder, the first and most important thing you can do is help them get the right diagnosis and treatment. You may need to make the appointment and go with them to see the doctor. Encourage your loved one to stay in treatment.



*If you're feeling extreme highs and lows over a period of time that affect your mood and keep you from going about your normal activities, you may be experiencing bipolar disorder.*



## what is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depressive illness, is a brain disorder that causes unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels and the ability to carry out daily tasks. Symptoms of bipolar disorder can be severe. They are different from the normal ups and downs that everyone goes through from time to time. Bipolar disorder symptoms can result in damaged relationships, poor job or school performance and even suicide. But bipolar disorder can be treated, and people with this illness can lead full and productive lives.

## how do I know if I have bipolar disorder?

People with bipolar disorder experience unusually intense emotional states that occur in distinct periods called "mood episodes." **Each mood episode represents a drastic change from a person's usual mood and behavior.** An overly joyful or overexcited state is called a **manic episode**, and an extremely sad or hopeless state is called a **depressive episode**.

Bipolar disorder can be present even when mood swings are less extreme. For example, some people with bipolar disorder experience **hypomania**, a less severe form of mania. During a hypomanic episode, you may feel very good, be highly productive and function well. Without proper treatment, people with hypomania may develop severe mania or depression. Bipolar disorder may also be present in a **mixed state**, in which you might experience both mania and depression at the same time. People in a mixed state feel very sad or hopeless while at the same time feel extremely energized.

Sometimes, a person with severe episodes of mania or depression has psychotic symptoms too, such as hallucinations or delusions.

### Symptoms of a manic episode:

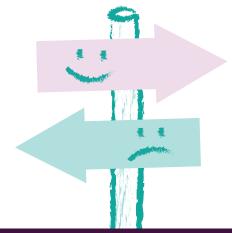
- Overly long period of feeling "high," or an overly happy or outgoing mood
- Extreme irritability
- Talking very fast, jumping from one idea to another, having racing thoughts
- Being unusually distracted
- Increasing activities, such as taking on multiple new projects
- Being overly restless
- Having an unrealistic belief in your abilities
- Being impulsive and engaging in pleasurable, high-risk behaviors
- Sleeping little or not being tired

### Symptoms of a depressive episode:

- An overly long period of feeling sad or hopeless
- Being restless or irritable
- Loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, including sex
- Feeling overly tired or "slowed down"
- Thinking of death or suicide, or attempting suicide
- Changing eating, sleeping or other habits
- Having problems concentrating, remembering and making decisions

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If you think you are experiencing bipolar disorder, finding help is the first step to recovery. Take an anonymous mental health screening at [www.mhamd.org](http://www.mhamd.org).



## how is bipolar disorder diagnosed?

Bipolar disorder usually lasts a lifetime. Episodes of mania and depression typically reoccur. Between episodes, many people with bipolar disorder are free of symptoms, but some people may have lingering signs.

Doctors diagnose bipolar disorder using guidelines from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). **To be diagnosed with bipolar disorder, the symptoms must be a major change from your normal mood or behavior.** There are four basic types of bipolar disorder:

- ➡ **Bipolar I Disorder** - defined by manic or mixed episodes that last at least seven days, or by manic symptoms that are so severe that the person needs immediate hospital care. Usually, depressive episodes occur as well, typically lasting at least 2 weeks.
- ➡ **Bipolar II Disorder** - defined by a pattern of depressive episodes and hypomanic episodes, but no full-blown manic or mixed episodes.
- ➡ **Bipolar Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (BP-NOS)** - diagnosed when symptoms of the illness exist but do not meet diagnostic criteria for either bipolar I or II. However, the symptoms are clearly out of the person's normal range of behavior.
- ➡ **Cyclothymic Disorder, or Cyclothymia** - a mild form of bipolar disorder. People with cyclothymia have episodes of hypomania as well as mild depression for at least 2 years. However, the symptoms do not meet the diagnostic requirements for any other type of bipolar disorder.



## how is bipolar disorder treated?

Proper treatment helps many people with bipolar disorder—even those with the most severe forms of the illness—gain better control of their mood swings and related symptoms. Because it is a lifelong illness, long-term, continuous treatment is needed to control symptoms.

Treatment is more effective if you work closely with a doctor and talk openly about your concerns and choices. An effective maintenance treatment plan usually includes a combination of medication and psychotherapy.

➡ **Medications** can help control symptoms of bipolar disorder. Not everyone responds to medications in the same way. You may need to try several different medications before finding ones that work best for you.

The types of medications generally used to treat bipolar disorder include mood stabilizers, atypical antipsychotics and antidepressants. For the most up-to-date information on medication use and their side effects, contact the U.S. Food and Drug Administration at [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov).

➡ **Psychotherapy**, when in combination with medication, can be an effective treatment for bipolar disorder. It can provide support, education and guidance to people with bipolar disorder and their families. Some psychotherapy treatments used to treat bipolar disorder include:

**Cognitive behavioral therapy**, which helps people with bipolar disorder learn to change harmful or negative thought patterns and behaviors.

**Family-focused therapy**, which helps families enhance coping strategies, such as recognizing new episodes early and helping their loved one. This therapy also improves problem-solving and communication among family members.

## where can I go for help?

Talk with someone you feel comfortable with, like your family doctor, religious leader or friend. They may give you suggestions or referrals for mental health treatment.

If you have private insurance, call the number on your insurance card specifically for mental health and substance use disorders. For information on public mental health services in your county, call your local Core Service Agency. Visit [www.mhamd.org](http://www.mhamd.org) for a listing of local Core Service Agencies.

### Get help quickly

Call the Maryland Crisis Hotline at  
**1-800-422-0009**

if you or someone you know is in crisis.

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