



What is bipolar disorder?

There are two main types of bipolar illness: bipolar I and bipolar II. In bipolar I, the symptoms include at least one lifetime episode of mania—a period of unusually elevated or irritable mood—and usually episodes of depression. In bipolar II, people suffer from episodes of depression as well as episodes of hypomania, a mild form of mania where they have an elevated mood as well as high energy and activity levels.^{1, 2}

How common is bipolar disorder?

Approximately 2.5% of Canadians suffer from bipolar I disorder, whereas up to 5% suffer from bipolar II disorder. The illness affects both men and women equally and occurs more often in people with family members who have it. The average age of onset is between 17 and 21 years of age.²

What are the risk factors for bipolar disorder?

Several factors play a role in the development of bipolar disorder, but the precise cause is still unknown. However, there is strong evidence suggesting that biological and genetic factors play an important part.¹

Stress is not a cause of the disease. But, it can trigger an episode in someone who already has the disease. Other triggers include: continuous lack of sleep, or substance abuse and use of certain drugs.¹

Can bipolar disorder be prevented?

Presently, there are no means of preventing bipolar disorder. However, there are ways of preventing future episodes:¹

- **Education on the illness:** future episodes can be averted if triggers are understood and coping mechanisms are developed. Ask your physician or your treatment team about the illness and its treatments.
- **A healthy lifestyle:** eating healthy meals, exercising regularly and maintaining normal sleep patterns can help prevent future attacks. Avoiding drug and alcohol abuse also helps.
- **Stress-coping strategies:** developing stress-coping mechanisms and ideally using more than one mechanism.
- **Avoiding isolation:** establishing a strong social network can be a great source of support.
- **A balanced life:** living a balanced and satisfying lifestyle can reduce stress.
- **A mood diary:** writing down symptoms, stressors and concerns about episodes can help you prepare for future ones.
- **A support network:** ensuring that family and friends are well educated about the illness and its symptoms is important. They can act as an important source of support for people with the disease.

What are the symptoms of bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is a complex illness and its symptoms can vary widely from individual to individual. While everyone feels happy at times and sad or depressed at others, people with bipolar disorder feel these emotions far more intensely, and their mood can change quickly.³ In fact, some people can go from over-happiness to extreme sadness in the same day.^{1, 4}

The symptoms of this illness result from an imbalance of chemicals in the brain. This imbalance causes people to have extreme shifts in mood, energy and ability to function.³ But the good news is that this imbalance can be treated and people with bipolar disorder can get back to their lives.⁴



How is bipolar disorder diagnosed?

Since symptoms vary from individual to individual, bipolar disorder can be hard to diagnose.^{1,2} More and more, the first signs of bipolar disorder are being recognized in adolescence or early adulthood. However, these symptoms may be mistaken for teenage distress, so bipolar disorder is often not diagnosed until adulthood.² But once it is, it can be managed effectively.⁴

According to the Canadian Network for Mood and Anxiety Treatments (CANMAT) guidelines for the management of bipolar disorder, bipolar I disorder is characterized by one or more manic episodes (see below for diagnostic criteria). Although depression is not required for the diagnosis of bipolar I disorder, almost everyone experiences depressive episodes (diagnostic criteria described below). In fact, depressive episodes are more common than manic ones.²

Bipolar II disorder is characterized by one or more depressive episodes accompanied by at least one hypomanic episode.²

Mania is characterized by experiencing three or more of the following symptoms for more than a week:³

- Inflated self-esteem and grandiose ideas
- Decreased need for sleep (feeling rested after only 3 hours of sleep)
- More talkative than usual
- Racing thoughts
- Highly distracted
- Increase in goal-directed activity (this can lead to reckless behaviour either socially, at work, or even sexually)
- Excessive involvement in pleasurable activities that have a high risk and potential for painful outcomes (unrestrained spending sprees, sexual indiscretions, or high-risk business investments)

In very extreme cases of mania, people can have psychotic symptoms where they can experience hallucinations or delusions.⁵

As for depression, someone is considered depressed if they feel sad, empty or tearful, have a significant loss of interest or pleasure in day-to-day activities and have five or more of the following symptoms during the same two-week period:^{3,5}

- A significant increase or decrease in weight or appetite
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Mental or physical slowing or restlessness
- Low energy
- Feelings of worthlessness or inappropriate guilt
- Difficulty concentrating
- Suicidal thoughts or attempts
- Recurrent thoughts of death

Some people can rapidly cycle through four or more episodes of mania, hypomania or depression within the same year.^{1,3}

How is bipolar disorder treated?

Bipolar disorder is a biological illness, so treatment is usually long term. The management of symptoms often requires a combination of medications plus psychological therapy to help people deal with the illness and live a full and meaningful life.⁶

Many people with bipolar disorder stop taking their medication because they do not accept their illness, because of side effects or because they enjoy the “high” of manic episodes.^{2,6} But side effects are usually manageable—it’s important to talk to a doctor before adjusting or stopping medication.^{1,6}



As symptoms vary from person to person, management of the disorder can vary greatly.⁶ It's essential that people with bipolar disorder speak to their doctor so that a treatment program can be tailored to their specific needs.

Usually, there are three parts to managing bipolar disorder:⁶

1. Treating the current episode of mania or depression
2. Preventing the recurrence of mania and depression
3. Managing the recovery

Since both the mania and the depression need to be treated, treatment usually involves more than one medication and long-term treatment is usually necessary to prevent relapses.^{1, 2, 7}

Mood stabilizers such as lithium, antiepileptics, conventional antipsychotics, newer antipsychotics, antidepressants and anti-anxiety medications have been effective in treating people in both the acute and maintenance phases of their therapy.⁶

People who choose to have psychological therapies such as counselling, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy tend to have better results than those who just take medication.⁵

- Counselling helps by problem-solving any long-term issues with family or at work. A lot of different approaches are used, so there's something suited to everyone. For sudden, major problems, crisis counselling is helpful.⁵
- CBT can help people to identify triggers of mood episodes and develop a written relapse prevention plan, and can show how thinking affects mood and teach people with the disease to think in a positive way about life and themselves. It is conducted by trained therapists.⁵
- Interpersonal therapy looks at how social factors (such as work, relationships and social roles) affect a person's life.

Support groups are available for people with bipolar disorder and their caregivers. They can be quite helpful for those who do not have close friends or family as part of their social support network. Support groups have been found to positively influence awareness of the illness, the interpersonal challenges and the treatments.^{5, 8}

For additional information on support groups, please visit the Mood Disorder Society of Canada at: <http://www.mooddisorderscanada.ca/>.

Living with bipolar disorder

The mental health of people with bipolar disorder can be greatly improved by looking after their physical health.⁹

People who are physically active report a range of benefits, both emotional and other, including:^{9, 10}

- A greater sense of wellbeing
- Increased self-esteem
- Decreased anxiety and depression
- Access to social networks

Physical activity also helps people relax and improves their ability to cope with stress.¹⁰ Sleeping is improved, too¹¹—and that can only help in dealing with everyday challenges.

As they get more fit, all kinds of activity become easier and they are more likely to go out for a hike, ride a bike, or enjoy a game with the kids. And all of that can help them lead a richer, fuller life.



What role does the doctor play?

Since bipolar disorder is a biological illness, long-term treatment (both medication and counselling) may be required.⁶ By working with a doctor, psychologist and psychiatrist, a treatment regimen can be tailored to an individual's needs.

People with bipolar disorder should talk openly with their doctor and answer his or her questions in as much detail as possible. They should ask any questions and raise any concerns they might have. It's important that they feel comfortable discussing issues with their doctor. If, for some reason they don't, they may need to find someone they feel more at ease with. What's more, people living with bipolar disorder should play an active role in their therapy.

How can someone with bipolar disorder be helped?

Someone who is moderately depressed will probably agree to medical treatment without needing too much encouragement. Yet a person who is severely depressed and suicidal may refuse to be treated. This happens because the person feels so hopeless and worthless. In this case, friends, family or caregivers should insist they see their doctor.¹

The best way to support someone with bipolar disorder is to:¹

- Learn about the illness (causes, signs, treatments)
- Encourage them to follow their medication as prescribed by their doctors
- Learn about the warning signs of suicide
- Suggest coping mechanisms to prevent future episodes
- Know that your family member needs to recover at his or her own pace. Try not to expect too much from them and avoid being too overprotective
- Learn to distinguish a good day from hypomania and a bad day from depression
- Also think about your own needs; take care of yourself.

It's important the employers become educated about the typical signs of mood changes that an employee with bipolar disorder may experience. While some employees prefer not to discuss their illness with their employers, creating an open environment to discuss the illness is beneficial. Employers and co-workers of someone with the illness can act as an important support network.¹

Where can people with bipolar disorder get more help?

There is a wealth of information to help people learn more about the disease and how to deal with it.

For additional information on bipolar disorder, available treatments, and how you can help, please visit: <http://www.mooddisorderscanada.ca/>.

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