About Bipolar Disorder

*Adapted from NHS and NIMH public information about bipolar disorder

**Symptoms of bipolar disorder**

- Bipolar disorder is characterized by extreme mood swings. These can range from extreme highs (mania) to extreme lows (depression).

- Episodes of mania and depression often last for several weeks or months.

**Depression**

During a period of depression, your symptoms may include:
- feeling sad, hopeless or irritable most of the time
- lacking energy
- difficulty concentrating and remembering things
- loss of interest in everyday activities
- feelings of emptiness or worthlessness
- feelings of guilt and despair
- feeling pessimistic about everything
- self-doubt
- being delusional, having hallucinations and disturbed or illogical thinking
- lack of appetite
- difficulty sleeping
- waking up early
- suicidal thoughts

**Mania**

The manic phase of bipolar disorder may include:
- feeling very happy, elated or overjoyed
- talking very quickly
- feeling full of energy
- feeling self-important
- feeling full of great new ideas and having important plans
- being easily distracted
- being easily irritated or agitated
- being delusional, having hallucinations and disturbed or illogical thinking
- not feeling like sleeping
- not eating
- doing things that often have disastrous consequences – such as spending large sums of money on expensive and sometimes unaffordable items
- making decisions or saying things that are out of character and that others see as being risky or harmful

**Patterns of depression and mania**

- If you have bipolar disorder, you may have episodes of depression more regularly than episodes of mania, or vice versa.
• Between episodes of depression and mania, you may sometimes have periods where you have a "normal" mood.

**The patterns aren't always the same and some people may experience:**
• rapid cycling – where a person with bipolar disorder repeatedly swings from a high to low phase quickly without having a "normal" period in between
• mixed state – where a person with bipolar disorder experiences symptoms of depression and mania together; for example, overactivity with a depressed mood
• If your mood swings last a long time but aren't severe enough to be classed as bipolar disorder, you may be diagnosed with cyclothymia (a mild form of bipolar disorder).

**Bipolar Disorder and Other Illnesses**

Some bipolar disorder symptoms are similar to other illnesses, which can make it hard for a doctor to make a diagnosis. In addition, many people have bipolar disorder along with another illness such as anxiety disorder, substance abuse, or an eating disorder. People with bipolar disorder are also at higher risk for thyroid disease, migraine headaches, heart disease, diabetes, obesity, and other physical illnesses.

**Psychosis:** Sometimes, a person with severe episodes of mania or depression also has psychotic symptoms, such as hallucinations or delusions. The psychotic symptoms tend to match the person’s extreme mood. For example:

• Someone having psychotic symptoms during a manic episode may believe she is famous, has a lot of money, or has special powers.
• Someone having psychotic symptoms during a depressive episode may believe he is ruined and penniless, or that he has committed a crime.

As a result, people with bipolar disorder who also have psychotic symptoms are sometimes misdiagnosed with schizophrenia.

**Anxiety and ADHD:** Anxiety disorders and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are often diagnosed among people with bipolar disorder.

**Substance Abuse:** People with bipolar disorder may also misuse alcohol or drugs, have relationship problems, or perform poorly in school or at work. Family, friends and people experiencing symptoms may not recognize these problems as signs of a major mental illness such as bipolar disorder.

**Risk Factors**

Scientists are studying the possible causes of bipolar disorder. Most agree that there is no single cause. Instead, it is likely that many factors contribute to the illness or increase risk.
**Brain Structure and Functioning:** Some studies show how the brains of people with bipolar disorder may differ from the brains of healthy people or people with other mental disorders. Learning more about these differences, along with new information from genetic studies, helps scientists better understand bipolar disorder and predict which types of treatment will work most effectively.

**Genetics:** Some research suggests that people with certain genes are more likely to develop bipolar disorder than others. But genes are not the only risk factor for bipolar disorder. Studies of identical twins have shown that even if one twin develops bipolar disorder, the other twin does not always develop the disorder, despite the fact that identical twins share all of the same genes.

**Family History:** Bipolar disorder tends to run in families. Children with a parent or sibling who has bipolar disorder are much more likely to develop the illness, compared with children who do not have a family history of the disorder. However, it is important to note that most people with a family history of bipolar disorder will not develop the illness.

**For Immediate Help**

**If You Are in Crisis:** Call the toll-free National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. The service is available to anyone. All calls are confidential.

**If you are thinking about harming yourself or thinking about suicide:**
- Tell someone who can help right away
- Call your licensed mental health professional if you are already working with one
- Call your doctor
- Go to the nearest hospital emergency department

**If a loved one is considering suicide:**
- Do not leave him or her alone
- Try to get your loved one to seek immediate help from a doctor or the nearest hospital emergency room, or call 911
- Remove access to firearms or other potential tools for suicide, including medications

**Talk to your doctor about your symptoms and which treatments may be best for you.**