

Bipolar Disorder in Children and Teens



- Bipolar disorder is an illness of the brain that causes extreme changes in a person's mood, energy, thinking, and behavior.
- An episode of mania includes a period where someone's mood has changed and it is elevated, expansive, or very irritable and the person also has increased energy at the same time.
- People who have bipolar disorder may also experience periods of depression with low, depressed, or irritable mood.
- A comprehensive evaluation by a child and adolescent psychiatrist or trained mental health professional can help identify bipolar disorder.
- Treatment includes education of the patient and the family, mood stabilizing medications, or atypical antipsychotics, and psychotherapy.

BIPOLAR DISORDER (formerly called manic depressive illness) is an illness of the brain that causes extreme changes in a person's mood, energy, thinking, and behavior. Children with bipolar disorder have periods (or episodes) of mania and depression.

MANIC EPISODES: An episode of mania includes a period where someone's mood has changed and it is elevated (overly happy), expansive, or very irritable and the person also has increased energy at the same time.

Other manic symptoms may include:

- Unrealistic highs in self-esteem - for example, a child or adolescent who feels all-powerful or like a superhero with special powers
- Great increase in energy
- Decreased need for sleep such as being able to go with little or no sleep for days without feeling tired
- Increase in talking - when the child or adolescent talks too much, too fast, changes topics too quickly, and cannot be interrupted
- Distractibility - the child's attention moves constantly from one thing to the next
- Thinking more quickly - for example, thoughts are on "fast forward" Repeated high risk-taking behavior, such as abusing alcohol and drugs, reckless driving, or sexual promiscuity

DEPRESSIVE EPISODES: People who have bipolar disorder may also experience periods of depression. An episode of depression includes low, depressed, or irritable mood.

Other symptoms of a depressive episode may include:

- Decreased enjoyment in favorite activities
- Low energy level or fatigue
- Major changes in sleeping patterns, such as oversleeping or difficulty falling asleep
- Poor concentration
- Complaints of boredom
- Major change in eating habits such as decreased appetite, failure to gain weight or overeating
- Frequent complaints of physical illnesses such as headaches or stomach aches
- Thoughts of death or suicide



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Some of these signs are similar to those that occur in children and adolescents with other problems such as drug abuse, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, major depressive disorder, disruptive mood dysregulation disorder, or even schizophrenia.

Bipolar disorder can begin in childhood or during the teenage years. The illness can affect anyone. However, if one or both parents have bipolar disorder, the chances are greater that their children may develop the disorder.

The diagnosis of bipolar disorder in children and teens is complex and involves careful observation over an extended period of time. A comprehensive evaluation by a child and adolescent psychiatrist or trained mental health professional can help identify bipolar disorder and is the first step to starting treatment. Children and teenagers with bipolar disorder can be effectively treated. Treatment for bipolar disorder usually includes education of the patient and the family about the illness, mood stabilizing medications such as lithium, or atypical antipsychotics, and psychotherapy. Medications often reduce the number and severity of manic episodes, and may also help to prevent depression. Psychotherapy helps the child understand himself or herself, adapt to stresses, rebuild self-esteem, and improve relationships.

National Resources

National Institute of
Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov

National Suicide Prevention
Lifeline
1.800.273.8255

Substance Abuse and Mental
Health Services Administration
www.samhsa.gov

Connecticut Resources

CT Network of Care
www.connecticut.networkofcare.org

Department of Mental Health
and Addiction Services
www.ct.gov/dmhas

Mental Health Connecticut
www.mhconn.org
800.842.1501 x10

NAMI Connecticut
www.namict.org
860.882.0236

Statewide Suicide
Prevention Campaign
www.preventsuicidect.org

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