Bipolar Disorder

Also known as manic-depressive illness, bipolar disorder is a brain disorder that causes unusual shifts in a person’s mood, energy, and ability to function.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), more than 5.7 million Americans – or about 2.6 percent of the population age 18 and older – suffer from bipolar disorder. It usually, but not always, develops in late adolescence or early adulthood. Bipolar disorder is often not recognized as an illness, and people may suffer for years before it is properly diagnosed and treated. Like diabetes or heart disease, bipolar disorder is a long-term illness that must be carefully managed throughout a person’s life.

Symptoms
Bipolar disorder causes dramatic mood swings – from overly “high” and/or irritable (known as mania) to sad and hopeless, and back again, often with periods of normal mood in between.

Signs and symptoms of mania include:
- Increased energy, activity, and restlessness
- Excessively euphoric mood
- Extreme irritability
- Racing thoughts and talking very fast, jumping from one idea to another
- Distractability
- Unrealistic beliefs in one’s abilities and powers
- Poor judgment
- Increased sexual drive
- Substance abuse

Signs and symptoms of depression include:
- Feelings of hopelessness and pessimism
- Loss of interest in activities once enjoyed, including sex
- Sleeping too much or not being able to sleep at all
- Change in appetite
- Decreased energy
- Thoughts of or attempts at suicide

Sometimes, severe episodes of mania or depression include symptoms of psychosis (common indicators are hallucinations and delusions). Because of this, people with bipolar disorder are sometimes incorrectly diagnosed as having schizophrenia, another severe mental illness.

Manifestation
Both children and adolescents may develop bipolar disorder. It is more likely to affect the children of parents who have the illness. Unlike many adults with bipolar disorder, children and young teens with the illness often experience very fast mood swings between depression and mania many times within a day; therefore, bipolar disorder can be hard to tell apart from other problems that may occur in these age groups. As with any illness, effective treatment depends on appropriate diagnosis. Children or adolescents with emotional and behavioral symptoms should be carefully evaluated by a mental health professional.
Cause
Most scientists agree that there is no single cause for bipolar disorder; rather, many factors act together to produce the illness. There is a genetic component, as bipolar disorder tends to run in families. Findings from gene research suggest that different genes act together in combination with other factors to cause bipolar disorder. Studies are ongoing in hopes of finding a specific underlying cause of the illness.

In situations where medication, psychological treatment, and the combination of these interventions prove ineffective or work too slowly, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) may be considered. ECT is a highly effective treatment for severe depressive, manic, and/or mixed episodes, and can be used when medical conditions (such as pregnancy) make the use of medications too risky.

Other Concerns
Alcohol and drug abuse are very common among people with bipolar disorder. Treating the substance abuse problem along with the bipolar disorder is an important part of the overall treatment plan.

Anxiety disorders, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), may also appear in people with bipolar disorder. The anxiety disorders may respond to the treatments used for bipolar disorder, or may need to be treated separately.

Getting Help
Anyone with bipolar disorder should be under the care of a psychiatrist skilled in the diagnosis and treatment of the disease. People with the illness may need assistance in seeking help:

- Often people with bipolar disorder do not realize how impaired they are, or they blame their problems on other causes.
- A person who is in the midst of a severe episode may need to be hospitalized for his/her own protection, and this may include hospitalization against his/her wishes.
- Those with bipolar disorder may need or seek encouragement from family and friends in order to get help.
- Many with this illness may benefit from joining support groups such as those sponsored by the National Mental Health Association (NMHA) – family and friends of the affected may benefit as well.

For more information, contact:

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