What causes bipolar disorder?

Several factors may contribute to bipolar disorder, including:

- **Genes**, because the illness runs in families. Children with a parent or sibling with bipolar disorder are more likely to get the illness than other children.
- **Abnormal brain structure** and **brain function**.
- **Anxiety disorders**. Children with anxiety disorders are more likely to develop bipolar disorder. The causes of bipolar disorder aren't always clear. Scientists are studying it to find out more about possible causes and risk factors. This research may help doctors predict whether a person will get bipolar disorder. One day, it may also help doctors prevent the illness in some people.

What are the symptoms of bipolar disorder?

Bipolar mood changes are called "mood episodes." Your child may have manic episodes, depressive episodes, or "mixed" episodes. A mixed episode has both manic and depressive symptoms. Children and teens with bipolar disorder may have more mixed episodes than adults with the illness.

Mood episodes last a week or two sometimes longer. During an episode, the symptoms last every day for most of the day.

Mood episodes are intense. The feelings are strong and happen along with extreme changes in behavior and energy levels.

**Children and teens having a manic episode may:**

- Feel very happy or act silly in a way that's unusual
- Have a very short temper
- Talk really fast about a lot of different things
- Have trouble sleeping but not feel tired
- Have trouble staying focused
- Talk and think about sex more often
- Do risky things.

**Children and teens having a depressive episode may:**

- Feel very sad
- Complain about pain a lot, like stomachaches and headaches
- Sleep too little or too much
- Feel guilty and worthless
- Eat too little or too much
- Have little energy and no interest in fun activities
- Think about death or suicide.

Do children and teens with bipolar disorder have other problems?

Bipolar disorder in young people can co-exist with several problems.

- **Substance abuse**. Both adults and kids with bipolar disorder are at risk of drinking or taking drugs.
- **Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD**. Children with bipolar disorder and ADHD may have trouble staying focused.
- **Anxiety disorders, like separation anxiety**. Children with both types of disorders may need to go to the hospital more often than other people with bipolar disorder.
- **Other mental illnesses, like depression**. Some mental illnesses cause symptoms that look like bipolar disorder. Tell a doctor about any manic or depressive symptoms your child has had.

Sometimes behavior problems go along with mood episodes. Young people may take a lot of risks, like drive too fast or spend too much money. Some young people with bipolar disorder think about suicide. **Watch out for any sign of suicidal thinking. Take these signs seriously and call your child's doctor.** Or Call CMHC’s 24-hour crisis number: 1-877-849-1248.
How is bipolar disorder diagnosed/treated?

An experienced doctor will carefully examine your child. There are no blood tests or brain scans that can diagnose bipolar disorder. Instead, the doctor will ask questions about your child's mood and sleeping patterns. The doctor will also ask about your child's energy and behavior. Sometimes doctors need to know about medical problems in your family, such as depression or alcoholism. The doctor may use tests to see if an illness other than bipolar disorder is causing your child's symptoms. Right now, there is no cure for bipolar disorder. Doctors often treat children who have the illness in a similar way they treat adults. Treatment can help control symptoms. Treatment works best when it is ongoing, instead of on and off.

1. Medication. Different types of medication can help. Children respond to medications in different ways, so the type of medication depends on the child. Some children may need more than one type of medication because their symptoms are so complex. Sometimes they need to try different types of medicine to see which are best for them. A good way to remember this is "start low, go slow". Always tell your child’s doctor about any problems with side effects. Do not stop giving your child medication without a doctor's help. Stopping medication suddenly can be dangerous, and it can make bipolar symptoms worse.

2. Therapy. Different kinds of psychotherapy, or "talk" therapy, can help children with bipolar disorder. Therapy can help children change their behavior and manage their routines. It can also help young people get along better with family and friends. Sometimes therapy includes family members.

How can I help my child or teen?

Help your child or teen get the right diagnosis and treatment. If you think he or she may have bipolar disorder, make an appointment with your family doctor to talk about the symptoms you notice.

If your child has bipolar disorder, here are some basic things you can do:

- Be patient
- Encourage your child to talk, and listen to him or her carefully
- Be understanding about mood episodes
- Help your child have fun

How does bipolar disorder affect parents and family?

Taking care of a child or teenager with bipolar disorder can be stressful for you too. You have to cope with the mood swings and other problems, such as short tempers and risky activities. This can challenge any parent. Sometimes the stress can strain your relationships with other people, and you may miss work or lose free time.

If you are taking care of a child with bipolar disorder, take care of yourself too. If you keep your stress level down you will do a better job. It might help your child get better too.

Where do I go for help?

If you're not sure where to get help, call your family doctor. You can also check the phone book for mental health professionals. Hospital doctors can help in an emergency.

United Families offers monthly Support groups with free child care and a free dinner. Call 1-877-967-6263 for more information.

I know a child or teen who is in crisis. What do I do?

If you're thinking about hurting yourself, or if you know someone who might, get help quickly.

- Do not leave the person alone
- Call your doctor
- Call 911 or go to the emergency room
- Call CMHC’s 24-hour crisis line: 1-877-849-1248
- Call a toll-free suicide hotline: 1-800-273-TALK (8255) for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. The TTY number is 1-800-799-4TTY (4889).

Contact us to find out more about bipolar disorder.
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