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## Patient education: Bipolar disorder (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

**What is bipolar disorder?** — Bipolar disorder (sometimes called "manic depression") is a brain disorder that causes extreme changes in mood and behavior ([figure 1](#)). Bipolar disorder can run in families.

**What are the symptoms of bipolar disorder?** — People with bipolar disorder can feel much happier or much sadder than normal. If you have bipolar disorder, you might feel very happy for many days and then feel very sad.

When your mood is very happy, you can also:

- Get angry quickly
- Be more active than normal
- Feel like you have special powers
- Feel like you don't need sleep
- Make poor choices without thinking
- Start lots of things and not finish them

Other times, your mood might be very sad for most of the day, every day. When your mood is very sad, you can also:

- Lose or gain a lot of weight
- Have trouble falling asleep or sleep too much
- Feel very tired
- Not enjoy things
- Feel bad about yourself
- Think about death or hurting yourself

People with bipolar disorder might have trouble at work or school. They might not get along well with their family and friends.

**Is there a test for bipolar disorder?** — No. There is no test. But your doctor or nurse should be able to tell if you have it by talking with you and your family. He or she will ask about your mood and what you have been feeling and doing. Your doctor or nurse might also do an exam and order blood tests to look for other problems.

**How is bipolar disorder treated?** — Bipolar disorder is treated with medicine. Medicines sometimes take a while to start working. Plus, it sometimes takes a few tries to find the right medicine or combination of medicines.

You and your doctor will work together to find the medicine that works best for you. All of the medicines for bipolar disorder affect the brain. They can:

- Keep your mood stable and prevent big mood changes
- Calm your mind
- Make your sadness go away

Medicines sometimes cause side effects.

You might also need to stay in the hospital for a short time. When a bipolar disorder mood episode starts, you might be at risk of hurting yourself or others. You might hear voices that other people do not hear. You might believe things that are not true. But if you are at the hospital, the doctors can treat these symptoms and keep you safe.

Some people whose bipolar disorder makes them feel very sad might need "shock treatment" to get better. Doctors call this treatment ECT. During ECT, doctors pass a small amount of electricity (called an "electrical current") through a person's brain in a safe way. This causes chemical changes in the brain that relieve severe depression.

In addition to medicine, psychotherapy (counseling) can help. This involves meeting with a therapist to talk about your feelings, thoughts, and life. There are different types of psychotherapy. In general, they all focus on helping you learn new ways of thinking and behaving, so you can better cope with your bipolar disorder.

**Is there anything I can do to prevent big mood changes in the future?** — Yes. After your symptoms have gone away, you will probably:

- Keep taking medicine every day to help prevent big changes in your mood and behavior
- Go to psychotherapy sessions to help you get along better with family and friends

**What if I want to get pregnant?** — If you want to get pregnant, you will need to talk with your doctor. Some medicines for bipolar disorder are OK to take if you are pregnant. Others are not. You might need to slowly reduce or change your medicine.

**What will my life be like?** — Many people with bipolar disorder are able to live normal lives, but they might:

- Have times of feeling very happy or very sad again in the future
- Take drugs or drink alcohol. If this happens, talk to your doctor.
- Try to hurt themselves. If you ever feel like hurting yourself, call your doctor, go to the hospital, or **call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, dial 9-1-1)**.

### More on this topic

[Patient education: Depression \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Electroconvulsive therapy \(ECT\) \(The Basics\)](#)

[Patient education: Bipolar disorder \(manic depression\) \(Beyond the Basics\)](#)

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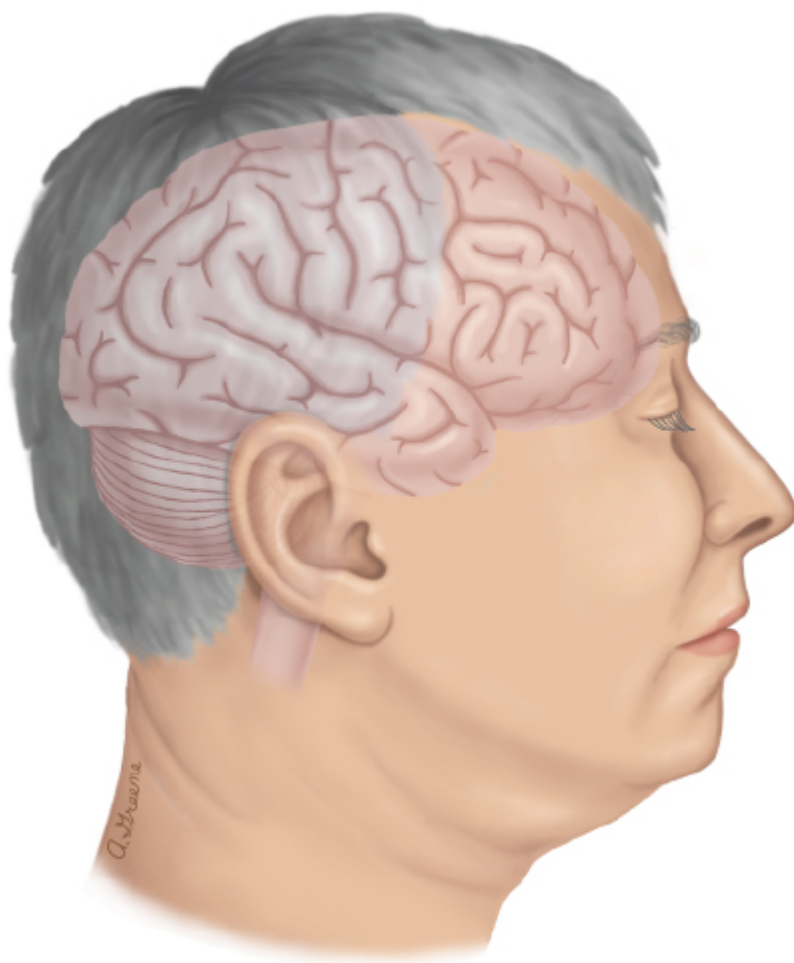
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## GRAPHICS

### Mood disorders caused by problems in the brain

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Mood disorders, such as depression and bipolar disorder, are caused by chemical imbalances in the brain. Treatments for these conditions work by changing the chemistry of the brain.

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