



Bipolar Disorder in Children

What is Bipolar Disorder?

Bipolar disorder, also known as manic-depression, is a mood disorder marked by extreme changes in mood, energy levels and behavior. Until recently, young people were rarely diagnosed with this disorder.

Children with bipolar disorder usually alternate rapidly between extremely high moods (mania) and low moods (depression). These mood shifts can produce irritability with periods of wellness between episodes, or the young person may feel both extremes at the same time. Parents who have children with the disorder often describe them as unpredictable, alternating between aggressive or silly and withdrawn. Children with bipolar disorder are at a greater risk for anxiety disorders and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder. These "co-occurring" disorders complicate diagnosis of bipolar disorder and contribute to the lack of recognition of the illness in children.



What are the Signs and Symptoms?



Manic Symptoms

- Severe changes in mood—from unusually happy or silly to irritable, angry or aggressive.
- Unrealistic highs in self-esteem.
- Great increase in energy level.
- Excessive involvement in multiple activities.
- Talks too much, too fast, changes topics too quickly, and cannot be interrupted.
- Racing thoughts or feeling pressure to keep talking.
- Risk-taking behavior such as abusing drugs and alcohol, attempting daredevil stunts, or being sexually active or having unprotected sex.

Depressive Symptoms

- Frequent sadness or crying
- Withdrawal from friends and activities
- Decreased energy level, lack of enthusiasm or motivation
- Feelings of worthlessness or excessive guilt
- Extreme sensitivity to rejection or failure
- Major changes in habits such as over-sleeping or over-eating
- Frequent physical complaints such as headaches and stomachaches
- Recurring thoughts of death, suicide, or self-destructive behavior

What Should Parents and Caregivers Do?

Bipolar disorder is treatable. Early identification, diagnosis, and treatment will help children reach their full potential. Children who exhibit signs of bipolar disorder should be evaluated by a mental health professional who specializes in treating children. The evaluation may include consultation with a child psychiatrist, psychological testing, and medical tests to rule out an underlying physical condition that might explain the child's symptoms. A comprehensive treatment plan should include psychotherapy and, in most cases, medication. This plan should be developed with the family, and, whenever possible, the child.

