

**What this fact sheet covers:**

- Genetics
- Brain chemicals
- Environmental
- Medical illness
- Pregnancy
- What is the future for someone with bipolar disorder?
- Where can I get help for bipolar disorder?
- Key points to remember
- Where to get more information.

Introduction

While we don't yet know exactly what causes bipolar disorder, we do know that it is primarily a biological illness. However, its onset is often linked to a stressful life event.

And while the causes of bipolar disorder are still unknown, there are a number of factors that are believed to play a role, including genetics, brain chemicals, environmental factors and sometimes medical illnesses. We discuss these briefly below.

Genetics

Bipolar disorder is frequently inherited, with genetic factors accounting for approximately 80 per cent of the cause of the condition.

If one parent has bipolar disorder, there is a 10 per cent chance that his or her child will develop the illness. If both parents have bipolar disorder the likelihood of their child developing the illness rises to 40 per cent.

However, just because one family member has the illness, it is not necessarily the case that other family members will also develop the illness. Other factors also come into play.

Brain chemicals

A recent theory about the cause of bipolar disorder is that it is related to abnormal serotonin chemistry in the brain. Serotonin is one of the neurotransmitters in the brain, and one that strongly affects a person's mood. It is thought that the abnormal serotonin chemistry causes mood swings because of its feedback effect on other brain chemicals. It is unlikely, however, that serotonin is the only neurotransmitter involved.



Environmental

While the onset of bipolar disorder may be linked to a stressful life event, it is unlikely that stress itself is a cause of bipolar disorder. Notwithstanding this, people who suffer from bipolar disorder often find it beneficial to discover ways of managing and reducing stress in their lives (as do people without the disorder!).

Again – while not a cause – seasonal factors appear to play a role in the onset of bipolar disorder, with onset chance increasing in spring. The rapid increase in hours of bright sunshine is thought to trigger depression and mania by affecting the pineal gland.

Medical illness

Medical illness is not a cause of bipolar disorder, but in some instances can cause symptoms that could be confused with mania or hypomania. Some medications and certain illicit stimulant drugs can also cause manic and hypomanic symptoms.

Pregnancy

For women who are genetically or otherwise biologically predisposed to developing bipolar disorder, the postnatal period can coincide with a first episode of bipolar disorder.

What is the future for someone with bipolar disorder?

Like any other medical condition, such as heart disease or diabetes, bipolar disorder is an illness that requires careful management.

While there is no known cure for bipolar disorder, the good news is that its severity and the frequency of episodes can be well controlled, reduced or prevented with medication and other supports, such as psychological therapies.

Where can I get help for bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder usually requires diagnosis and treatment by a psychiatrist. However, if you have not previously sought help for bipolar disorder, as a first step, you should see your General Practitioner. He or she will either conduct an assessment of you to find out if you have bipolar disorder, or refer you to a psychiatrist who will conduct the assessment.

The psychiatrist will develop a management plan in consultation with you and possibly also your General Practitioner. Depending on the nature of your illness, ongoing management may be undertaken by the psychiatrist, or by your General Practitioner, in consultation with your psychiatrist.



Key points to remember

- The causes of bipolar disorder are not conclusively known, but it is a biological illness whose onset is often linked to a stressful life event.
- Bipolar disorder is frequently inherited.
- Seasonal factors appear to play a role in the onset of bipolar disorder.
- Pregnancy can coincide with a first episode of bipolar disorder in women who are genetically or otherwise biologically predisposed to developing bipolar disorder.
- There is presently no known cure for bipolar disorder but with skilled medical management, the person with bipolar disorder can lead a stable and productive life, with the condition well controlled.

Where to get more information

- Do our online self-test or watch our Bipolar Disorder Education Program www.blackdoginstitute.org.au
- National Institute of Mental Health (US) www.nimh.nih.gov

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