



# Causes of bipolar disorder



## What the fact sheet covers:

- Factors involved in developing bipolar disorder
- Where to get help for bipolar disorder
- Where to get more information.

## Introduction

While the exact causes of bipolar disorder are not yet fully understood, we do know that it is primarily a biological illness. However, its onset is often linked to stressful life events. Several factors are believed to play a role in developing bipolar disorder, including genetics, brain chemicals, psychological and environmental factors, and sometimes medical illnesses.

## Genetic factors

Bipolar disorder is frequently inherited, with genetic factors accounting for approximately 80% of the cause of the condition. If one parent has bipolar disorder, there is a 10% chance that their child will develop the illness. If both parents have bipolar disorder the likelihood of their child developing the illness rises to 40%. However, just because one family member has the illness, it is not necessarily the case that other family members will also develop the illness. The following factors might also be involved in the onset of bipolar disorder.

## 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 levels causes mood swings because of its feedback effect on other brain chemicals. It is unlikely; however, that serotonin is the only neurotransmitter involved; other neurotransmitters are also likely to play a role.

## Psychological and environmental factors

While not the cause of bipolar disorder, the onset of bipolar disorder may be linked to psychological and environmental stressors such as excessive interpersonal discord, negative life events, and impacted sleep and wake rhythms. People often find it beneficial to explore ways

of managing these factors, including reducing stress and emotional pressure in their lives to reduce the risk of relapse.

Seasonal factors appear to play a role in the onset of bipolar disorder, with the likelihood of onset increasing in spring. The rapid increase in hours of bright sunshine is thought to trigger depression and mania (a severely high mood where an individual often experiences delusions and/or hallucinations) or hypomania (a less severe high without any delusions and/or hallucinations) by affecting the pineal gland (which is responsible for the release of melatonin).

## Medical illness

Medical illness by itself 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 perinatal 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 frequency of episodes can be well controlled, reduced or prevented with medication and other supports, such as psychological therapies.



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## Where to get help for bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder usually requires diagnosis and treatment by a psychiatrist. However, if help has not previously been sought for bipolar disorder, the first step is to see a General Practitioner (GP). The GP will either conduct an assessment to establish whether the individual has bipolar disorder, or refer the person to a psychiatrist who will conduct the assessment. The psychiatrist will develop a management plan in consultation with the individual and possibly their GP. Depending on the nature of the illness, ongoing management may be undertaken by the psychiatrist or by the GP, in consultation with the psychiatrist. Alongside medication treatment, there is growing evidence for the benefit of psychological intervention (e.g. cognitive behavioural therapy, psycho-education, and family-focused approaches) for long-term management of bipolar disorder.

## Where to get more information

- **A Daily Mood Graph** and other relevant fact sheets can be downloaded from our website at: [www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/resources-support/fact-sheets/](http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/resources-support/fact-sheets/)
- **Mastering Bipolar Disorder: an insider's guide to managing mood swings and finding balance**, Kerrie Evers & Gordon Parker (2008) Allen & Unwin.
- **1800 011 511 Mental Health Line** is a NSW Government phone service operating 24 hours a day, seven days a week and will provide a telephone triage assessment and referral service staffed by mental health clinicians.

## For more information

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