

Treatments for bipolar disorder



What the fact sheet covers:

- Physical treatments
- Psychological therapies
- Hospitalisation
- Effective management of bipolar disorder
- Where to get more information

What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is a biological condition with a strong genetic component which requires long-term management. Both medication and lifestyle management are required to treat and manage bipolar disorder. Without medication, relapse is more likely. Psychological therapies are a useful addition to drug therapies.

Management of bipolar disorder

The management of bipolar disorder usually involves two parts:

- Treating a current episode of mania, hypomania or depression.
- Preventing the long-term recurrence of mania, hypomania and depression.

Physical treatments

Since bipolar disorder involves episodes of depression and episodes of mania or hypomania, medications for bipolar disorder have two main functions:

- **Mood stabilisers** are medications that treat or prevent mania or hypomania by stabilising mood – those commonly used include lithium carbonate and sodium valproate (called 'Epilim' in Australia).
- **Anti-depressants** are medications that treat the depression – there are different classes of these: some common ones used for bipolar disorder are the Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) and the Dual Action Antidepressants.





- **Antipsychotics** are medications used if psychotic symptoms are present, they will also help with insomnia and agitation. 'Rapid cycling disorder' (very frequent highs and lows) or 'mixed episodes' (with symptoms of highs and lows simultaneously) may need different medications.

Psychological therapies

Psychological therapies such as counselling, psychotherapy, cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and family focused therapy are important additions to medications in the treatment of bipolar disorder. However, when used by themselves i.e. without medication, they can be ineffective.

Combining physical treatments and psychological therapies has been clearly demonstrated to be better than using physical treatments alone.

Hospitalisation

If someone with bipolar disorder becomes psychotic, highly excited, aggressive or involved in clearly destructive behaviour, the issue of hospitalisation often arises. While some people may be managed outside a hospital setting (perhaps with the assistance of community mental health resources) for others, admission may be necessary.

Effective management of bipolar disorder

To help with the effective long-term management of bipolar disorder, the following four components are recommended:

1. **Education** is important for both the person with bipolar disorder and their supporters. Essential information includes the causes of bipolar disorder (genetic and environmental), medications and their possible side-effects, psychological treatments, lifestyle factors, identifying triggers and early warning signs of relapse.
2. **Medication** – Individuals with bipolar disorder need to work in partnership with their doctor to find a combination of medications and dosages that minimise side-effects and help them to control the condition. Charting their moods with a Daily Mood Graph will help with this.
3. **Wellbeing Plans** are designed to help people stay well in the short and long-term and are unique to each person. They include identifying triggers and stresses that may cause problems, developing strategies for coping with at-risk or stressful situations, pinpointing early warning signs of both highs and lows and making lifestyle changes (e.g. reducing caffeine intake, getting adequate amounts of sleep).



4. **Multidisciplinary interventions** – it's important to explore different approaches to help support lifestyle changes. Exercise is important in improving overall wellbeing, while working with a social worker can also help individuals with bipolar stay engaged in school or work.

Key points to remember

To help with the effective long-term management of bipolar disorder, the following three components are recommended:

- Bipolar disorder is an illness which requires long-term treatment and management.
- Everyone is different and therefore the appropriate treatment for a particular individual is a matter for a skilled medical practitioner to decide in consultation with the patient.
- Physical treatments (medication) are necessary for bipolar disorder; psychological approaches are by themselves insufficient but serve a valuable complementary role alongside medication.
- Different medications are used to treat acute episodes of mania and for depression; other medications ('mood stabilisers') are used to keep episodes at bay or to augment acute treatments.

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/factsheets.

Mastering Bipolar Disorder: an insider's guide to managing mood swings and finding balance, Kerrie Evers & Gordon Parker (2008) Allen & Unwin.



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