



# Mental Health Association of Northern Kentucky

A LEADER IN PROVIDING ADVOCACY, EDUCATION, AND SERVICES THAT PROMOTE MENTAL WELLNESS

EDUCATION AND SCREENING OUTREACH PARTNER FOR THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH AND  
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## **FACT SHEET ON BIPOLAR DISORDER**

### **Background**

Approximately one in 100 American adults experience bipolar disorder, which is also known as manic depression because it typically involves episodes of mania and depression. The person's mood usually swings from overly "high" or irritable to sad and hopeless, with periods of normal moods in between. Bipolar disorder typically begins in adolescence or early adulthood and continues throughout life, sometimes leading to substance abuse and suicide.

### **Causes**

Scientific research has linked brain chemistry and genes to bipolar disorder:

- Sophisticated research indicates that bipolar disorder is inherited. Data indicated that if one identical twin suffered from mania, there was a 70 - 80 % chance that the other twin (who had the same genetic structure) would also be affected. However, among non-identical twins, there was a 25 % chance that the other twin would experience mania.
- Studies show that a deficit of brain chemicals, including norepinephrine, serotonin and dopamine, is linked to bipolar disorder.
- Hormonal imbalances, and particularly elevation in the level of the hormone cortisol, have also been connected to the disorder

### **Treatments**

Effective medications and other therapies are available that reduce the suffering caused by bipolar disorder:

- Treatment for bipolar disorder is divided into three stages; acute mania, acute depression and maintenance
- Lithium is the standard, highly effective treatment for this disorder. Lithium is also the maintenance therapy of choice; it lessens the frequency and severity of manic and depressive episodes and helps stabilize moods between episodes.
- For people who do not respond to lithium treatment, the anticonvulsant carbamazepine (Tegretol) is an effective antimanic medication

- The anticonvulsant valproate (Depakote) was approved by the FDA in 1995. It has been found effective for both rapid-cycling (rapid mood swings) and non-rapid-cycling bipolar disorder and is often combined with lithium for maximum effect.
- Several types of antidepressants, including bupropion (Wellbutrin), have been shown to reduce symptoms of depression when combined with lithium or anticonvulsants
- In the treatment of severe cases of bipolar disorder, electro convulsive therapy has proven beneficial when other therapies have failed.
- Supportive psychotherapy, which helps people understand and deal with the symptoms of bipolar disorder, is a proven supplement to medication therapy

### **Treatment Success Rates**

Medications and psychotherapy have been successful in treating individuals with bipolar disorder:

- Bipolar disorder is reduced in approximately 80 to 90 % of people treated with medication
- Symptoms can often be treated quickly; a study found that symptoms in 80 % of people treated with lithium improved within 5 to 10 days
- With optimal treatment, a person with bipolar disorder can regain approximately 7 years of life and 9 years of normal health, which otherwise would have been lost due to the illness
- Without treatment, the rate of mortality for people with bipolar disorder is two to three times higher than mortality rates for an average person. Long-term lithium treatment reduces mortality rates for people with bipolar disorder to the same level experienced by the general population.
- Psychotherapy often increases medication compliance and reduces the length of hospitalization for individuals with bipolar disorder, from 16 weeks per year to 3 weeks per year
- Because repeated episodes have a cumulative negative effect on functioning and treatment response, the sooner people are diagnosed and treated, the better their chances for recovery.

### **New Treatments / Research Advances**

Research in the last year is changing the way individuals with bipolar disorder are treated: many other medications are currently being tested for their effectiveness in treating bipolar disorder. Some of the most promising medications are calcium channel blockers, which appear to successfully treat individuals who do not respond to the older medications.