



Pediatric Bipolar Disorder Fact Sheet

- Bipolar disorder (also known as "bipolar illness" or "manic-depressive illness") is a treatable and heritable brain disorder characterized by severe fluctuations in mood, activity, thought and behavior.
- The onset of illness can be triggered by trauma, but often appears with no identifiable cause. Symptoms can emerge at any time of life, including during preschool years.
- Bipolar disorder is believed to occur in at least 1-2% of the adolescent and adult population, with bipolar spectrum disorders (such as recurrent depression) believed to occur in 5-7%. There are no studies that measure the prevalence among younger children, but the number of children diagnosed is rising as doctors begin to recognize signs of the disorder in children. The incidence may also be increasing, for unknown reasons. CABF conservatively estimates that at least three quarters of a million American children and teenagers, mostly undiagnosed, may currently suffer from bipolar disorder.
- Children with bipolar disorder are at risk for school failure, addiction, and suicide. The lifetime mortality rate from bipolar disorder from suicide is higher than that for some childhood cancers.
- 59% of adults with bipolar disorder surveyed by the National Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association in 1993 reported that symptoms of their illness appeared during or before adolescence. The time between onset of symptoms and proper treatment is often 8-10 years, longer for pediatric cases.
- Bipolar disorder in children often begins with major depression marked by not wanting to play, chronic irritability and sadness. Preschoolers may talk of wanting to "make myself dead." Mania (the activated state) may include decreased need for sleep, hyperactivity, daredevil acts, elation and grandiose thinking. Racing thoughts, separation anxiety and intense temper tantrums (also called "rages" or "affective storms") can occur during depression or mania. Sometimes symptoms of both states occur together in mixed states (depressed mood with high energy) or in quick succession within a single day (called rapid cycling).
- The symptoms of bipolar disorder resemble symptoms of ADHD with some important distinctions. About 15% of children diagnosed with ADHD may also have bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder may first emerge with an episode of depression. Treatment with stimulants or antidepressants can trigger mania or mixed states in children with bipolar disorder or a family history of the illness.
- According to the National Institute of Mental Health, over 1.5 million children under the age of 15 are severely depressed. In one recent longitudinal study, nearly half of children with major depression before puberty developed mania (necessary for a diagnosis of bipolar disorder) by age 20.
- A good treatment plan may include medication, psychotherapy for the child, multi-family psychoeducational groups for child and family, peer support for parents, and accommodations at school.
- For more information, visit the Web site of the Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation at www.bpkids.org.

Child & Adolescent Bipolar Foundation

A parent-led, not-for-profit organization providing education, support and advocacy for families raising children with bipolar disorder.