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Family Physicians Offer Information about Bipolar Disorder

(COLUMBUS, Ohio)—Bipolar disorder, also called manic-depressive illness, is an illness that causes mood swings as a result of a chemical imbalance in the brain.

Bipolar disorder is very common, affecting 4 percent of the adult population. A person with a parent who has bipolar disorder has a much greater chance of developing it. Many people who suffer from bipolar disorder try to cover up their pain with drugs, alcohol and risky sexual behavior.

At times, a person who has bipolar disorder may feel high, full of energy and able to do anything. The person might not even want to rest when he feels this way. This feeling is called mania. At other times, a person who has bipolar disorder may feel very sad and depressed. The person may not want to do anything when he feels this way. This is called depression. People with bipolar disorder can go quickly from mania to depression and back again. Most people with bipolar disorder spend most of their time being depressed.

“Unfortunately, most people with bipolar disorder are being treated with antidepressants alone,” said Dr. Stan Anderson, a family physician in North Canton, Ohio. “It is very difficult to make a correct diagnosis because most bipolar patients do not recall their episodes of mania. As a result, most bipolar patients get better but they do not get well,” said Anderson.

Bipolar disorder can be treated by a family doctor, who also may want the patient to see a psychiatrist. Patient and doctor will work together to control mood swings and make sure the patient stays well.

Bipolar disorder is treated with medicines to stop mood swings. Mood stabilizers are used to even out highs and lows in one’s mood. Antidepressant medication can help reduce the symptoms of depression. A doctor may add other medicines as needed. These medicines do not start to work right away, but the patient will start to notice a difference in his moods after a few weeks. Patients should be sure to take all medicines as directed by their doctors.

“The newer bipolar medications are highly effective,” said Anderson. “The medications are meant to be taken continually, but often people feel so much better that they stop taking their medications and then ‘crash and burn,’” said Anderson.

Counseling can help with stress, family concerns and relationship problems. It is important to get counseling for bipolar disorder. If you think you may be suffering from bipolar disorder, make an appointment to see your family physician.

The Ohio Academy of Family Physicians is a statewide professional association with more than 4,400 members, including practicing physicians, family medicine residents and medical students. The scope of family medicine encompasses all ages, both sexes and every disease entity. Family physicians provide comprehensive, continuing care to all members of the family.

FACT SHEET

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Signs of Mania and Depression:

Mania:

- Feeling very irritable or angry.
- Thinking and talking so fast that other people cannot follow your thoughts.
- Not sleeping at all.
- Feeling very powerful and important.
- Having trouble concentrating.
- Spending too much money.
- Abusing alcohol and drugs.
- Having sex without being careful to prevent pregnancy or disease.

Depression:

- Having no interest or pleasure in things you used to enjoy.
- Feeling sad or numb; crying easily or for no reason.
- Feeling slowed down or restless and irritable.
- Feeling worthless or guilty.
- Experiencing a change in appetite or unintended change in weight.
- Having trouble recalling things, concentrating or making decisions.
- Suffering from headaches, backaches or digestive problems.
- Experiencing problems sleeping or wanting to sleep all of the time; feeling tired all of the time.
- Having thoughts about death and suicide.

How You Can Get Better:

- Read about bipolar disorder and tell your family what you learn.
- Have a regular routine. Go to bed and wake up at about the same time every day, and eat your meals and exercise at regular times.
- Take your medicine every day, even if you start feeling better. Avoid caffeine and over-the-counter medicines for colds, allergies and pain. Ask your doctor before you drink alcohol or use any other medicines.
- Try to avoid stress.
- Learn the early warning signs of your illness and inform your doctor when you notice changes.
- Join a local support group so that you and your family can share information and experiences with others.

Online Resource: www.familydoctor.org