Frequently Asked Questions about Bipolar Disorder

By Steve Bressert, PhD

People often have common questions about the basics of manic depression. These are some of the most commonly asked questions — and their answers — about manic depression (also known as bipolar disorder):

Is there a test to tell me if I have, or may inherit, bipolar disorder?

Currently, no test can tell a person if he is at risk of developing bipolar disorder. It is unlikely that a single gene will be discovered that is responsible for the illness in all people with bipolar disorder.

Can someone have a medical condition that appears to be bipolar disorder but actually is something else?

Certain conditions mimic mood disorders, including bipolar disorder. Common ones are:

- thyroid conditions
- neurological diseases, such as multiple sclerosis, brain tumors, stroke or epilepsy
- infections of the brain from conditions such as HIV infection, syphilis, sleep apnea and lyme disease
- deficiencies of certain vitamins, such as vitamin B12
- corticosteroid use, especially in high doses
- medicine used to prevent diseases like tuberculosis and AIDS

Telling your doctor about your medical history and the medications that you are currently taking can help her determine the cause of your condition.

What if someone I know has bipolar disorder?

Family members may want to express their concern by describing the specific behaviors to that person in a nonjudgmental fashion. The person with the disorder is less able to dismiss the observation if there is a consensus among friends or family members that a distinctive pattern has emerged.

At the work site, violations of safety codes or negligence may need to be reported to supervisors so that the person can receive a medical evaluation before injury or disability occurs.

If I am diagnosed with bipolar disorder, will I be on medication for the rest of my life?
Not necessarily. However, patients are encouraged to stay on medication indefinitely if an episode was very frightening or associated with great risk to their health, finances or family relationships.

Is there anything I can do to help my disorder?

Yes. First, learn all you can about your illness by reading books, going to lectures and talking to your doctor. Get support from others who also have the illness. The Depressive and Manic-Depressive Association is a good place to look for a support group in your area. In these groups, you can hear how others face the challenges of life and manage their mood and treatment medications. For helpful hints for managing your illness, see Coping With Bipolar Disorder.

How can lifestyle affect bipolar disorder?

Lack of a consistent routine and disrupted sleep can trigger a mood episode. Choosing work and leisure activities that allow proper sleep and rest is vital to healthy emotional functioning. Families can support good mental hygiene by going to bed and getting up at the same time each day.