

Bipolar disorder



Ymchwil Iechyd
a Gofal Cymru
Health and Care
Research Wales



People with bipolar disorder experience extreme variations in mood and energy levels, which can include extreme highs, lows or 'mixed' states.

If you have bipolar disorder, you will experience periods or 'episodes' of highs known as mania or hypomania and usually, periods of depression.

Some may also have problems with thinking and perception, which can include symptoms of psychosis.

This can include thinking things that are not true (called delusions) and seeing or hearing things that are not there (called hallucinations).

Bipolar disorder can cause many difficulties but there is a lot that can be done to stay well.

This includes lifestyle changes, medication and talking treatments.

We are still learning about what causes bipolar disorder.

Research suggests genetics play a role in whether someone develops the illness.

We also know the brain systems involved in controlling our moods work differently in people with bipolar disorder.

Other factors can increase the risk of developing bipolar disorder such as trauma and use of recreational drugs.

For some people with bipolar disorder there are triggers for their mood episodes. Life stress or use of recreational drugs can trigger mood episodes.

Change in usual sleep patterns could be a trigger or indicator of a mood episode.



Getting help

If you think you might have bipolar disorder you should first see your GP who will perform an initial assessment.

Depending upon the outcome of this, your GP will decide whether you need a referral to a primary care mental health worker, your

local community mental health team (CMHT) or another service, depending on your needs.

If you are referred to your local CMHT you will receive a further detailed assessment, and they will work with you to plan the right treatments for you.

Treatments for bipolar disorder

For many people with bipolar disorder medication is a key part of staying well. There are many medications that can help.

Some work by preventing the extreme highs or lows caused by the condition; these are known as mood stabilisers and often need to be taken daily for long periods.

Other medications may then be used to treat episodes of high or low moods when they happen.

Different medications suit different people, and finding the best medication for an individual can take time, and trials of different medications and doses.

Talking treatments such as psychoeducation can also be helpful.

This approach helps people to understand their illness, learn to recognise early warning signs of highs and lows and develop the skills needed to stay as well as possible.

Bipolar Education Programme Cymru, also known as BEPCymru, is one example. Find out more about this course at ncmh.info/bepc

A combination of medication and psychoeducation is often most effective.

Tips for people with bipolar disorder

- The key things that are known to help in bipolar disorder are medications, education and following lifestyle recommendations with a focus on maintaining routine and balance.
- It is crucial to take medication regularly as prescribed stopping and starting suddenly can make things worse.
- There are many medications for bipolar and finding the one that works the best for you can take time.
- Learn as much as you can about the condition and how to stay well. There are many bipolar disorder websites, self-help books and education groups. Find details on some of these at ncmh.info
- If you have bipolar, are female, and planning a family, you should discuss it with your doctor. There are some things you may want to consider around bipolar disorder and pregnancy.
- Look after your physical health as well as your mental health. Sticking to a regular and sufficient sleep routine, eating healthily, avoiding recreational drugs and moderating your alcohol consumption can all help you to avoid becoming unwell.
- Even if you are well now, you may have more episodes if low or high mood in the future. Try to have a plan in place in case you become unwell again. You can find advice on advance decision making at advancechoice.org
- Talk to other people who have bipolar disorder. Their knowledge and experience can be helpful. Organisations such as Bipolar UK (bipolaruk.org) can help you to do this.



Tips for families, partners and carers

- A loved one with bipolar disorder may need your help to stay well. Try to be open and understanding about their condition.
- Ask them about their concerns and how you can help.
- Talk to the mental health professionals who are looking after them. Don't be afraid to ask questions and for advice.
- Don't assume that every small mood change or disagreement is related to the illness.
- Have a plan for what to do if your relative becomes unwell in the future.
- Learn as much as you can about bipolar disorder and possible treatments. There are useful links included in this leaflet and on ncmh.info, including a list of books on the subject.
- Talk to others who care for people with bipolar disorder. They may have experienced similar situations and have useful tips. Organisations like Bipolar UK (bipolaruk.org) can help you to do this.



Our work with the Brain and Genomics Hub

We are working with the Brain and Genomics Hub to build a community of 600 people with lived experience of bipolar disorder.

The Brain and Genomics Hub is one of six new research hubs that make up the Mental Health Research Platform funded by UKRI.

The platform was established to accelerate progress towards new and more effective treatments for serious mental illness.

The third sector organisations Bipolar UK and Adferiad are helping us to put the lived experiences of people at the heart of our research.

Why we are doing this research

Currently there is a lot of overlap in the diagnosis of conditions like bipolar disorder, psychosis, schizophrenia, or schizoaffective disorder.

At the same time, people who have received the same diagnosis can have vastly different experiences and symptoms, and can respond differently to existing treatments.

Take part

The Bipolar, Schizophrenia and Psychosis Research Initiative (B-Sprint) study from the Brain and Genomics Hub aims to go beyond diagnostic boundaries, to help identify ways to develop more targeted treatment approaches for people living with these conditions, and to improve how they are diagnosed.

To find out more, please visit ncmh.info/bsprint



Useful websites

NHS Choices

Detailed information on bipolar disorder, including symptoms, treatments and where to get help.

[nhs.uk/conditions/bipolar-disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/bipolar-disorder)

Royal College of Psychiatrists

Information on many aspects of bipolar disorder, including downloadable leaflets in several languages.

[rcpsych.ac.uk](https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk)

Bipolar Education Programme Cymru

Details on the psychoeducation programme which aims to help people with bipolar to better understand and manage their condition.

ncmh.info/bepc

Bipolar UK

This organisation provides information and advice and runs support groups and an online community for people with bipolar and their loved ones.

bipolaruk.org

National Centre for Mental Health

In our Piece of Mind podcast, we interviewed Professor Tania Gergel about advance choice documents (ACDs) and advice on having a plan in place in case you become unwell again. Listen to the episode on our website or visit:

bit.ly/pompodacd



Join our NCMH research community

Join our research community today and help us better understand conditions like bipolar disorder. The aim of our research is to improve diagnosis, treatment, and support for people in the future.

Joining our community is easy - it involves completing an online sign-up form which takes about 15 minutes and will ask you about:

- personal information, like date of birth and ethnicity
- mental and physical health
- lifestyle

To join, visit: ncmh.info/join

Or scan:



Stay up to date



@thencmh



/walesmentalhealth



@ncmh_wales



www.ncmh.info

Produced by the National Centre for Mental Health.

The information in this leaflet is correct at the time of printing (January 2026).

NCMH is funded by Welsh Government through Health and Care Research Wales.

Mae'r wybodaeth hon hefyd ar gael drwy gyfrwng y Gymraeg. I ofyn am gopi, cysylltwch â ni.

info@ncmh.info
029 2068 8401

