

Geriatric Bipolar Disorder: A Guide for Patients & Families

Bipolar disorder is a mental health condition that causes episodes of depression and episodes of elevated or irritable mood (called mania or hypomania). In older adults, bipolar disorder may look different than it does in younger people. Mood changes may be mixed with sleep problems, irritability, or changes in thinking and energy levels. With proper treatment and monitoring, many people with bipolar disorder are able to maintain stable mood and good quality of life.

Signs & Symptoms to Watch For

Common Cognitive Symptoms

- Difficulty concentrating or staying focused
- Racing thoughts during manic episodes
- Trouble making decisions
- Memory complaints during depressive episodes
- Mental fatigue after mood episodes

Behavioral & Emotional Changes

- Periods of depression with sadness or low energy
- Periods of elevated or unusually irritable mood
- Increased talkativeness or rapid speech
- Impulsive behavior or poor judgment during manic episodes
- Social withdrawal during depressive periods

Physical Symptoms

- Changes in sleep (sleeping too much or too little)
- Increased energy or restlessness during manic episodes
- Fatigue during depressive episodes
- Changes in appetite or weight
- Reduced need for sleep during manic periods

Typical Presentation & Progression

Depressive Episodes

- Persistent sadness or low mood
- Loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities
- Fatigue and low energy
- Difficulty concentrating
- Changes in sleep or appetite

Manic or Hypomanic Episodes

- Elevated or unusually irritable mood
- Increased energy or activity
- Reduced need for sleep
- Racing thoughts or rapid speech
- Impulsive decisions or risky behavior

Later Course of Illness

- Mood episodes may become less intense but more frequent in some individuals
- Sleep disturbances may worsen
- Cognitive symptoms such as slowed thinking or concentration problems may appear
- Ongoing treatment helps reduce relapse risk

Medications Commonly Used FDA-Approved Treatments for Bipolar Disorder

SGA=Second Generation Antipsychotic; LAI=Long Acting Injectable

Medication	Brand	Class	Notes
Lithium		Mood stabilizer	Classic mood stabilizer
Valproate / divalproex	Depakote®	Mood stabilizer	Acute mania
Carbamazepine ER	Equetro®	Mood stabilizer	Extended-release capsules
Lamotrigine	Lamictal®	Mood stabilizer	Maintenance only
Aripiprazole (oral)	Abilify®	SGA	Oral formulation
Aripiprazole LAI	Abilify Maintena®	SGA LAI	Maintenance monotherapy
Asenapine	Saphris®	SGA	Sublingual
Cariprazine	Vraylar®	SGA	Mania/mixed + bipolar depression
Lurasidone	Latuda®	SGA	Bipolar depression
Lumateperone	Caplyta®	SGA	Bipolar depression; bipolar I or II
Olanzapine	Zyprexa®	SGA	Oral olanzapine
Olanzapine / fluoxetine	Symbyax®	Combination	Bipolar I depression
Quetiapine	Seroquel®	SGA	Immediate-release
Quetiapine XR	Seroquel XR®	SGA	Extended-release
Risperidone (oral)	Risperdal®	SGA	Oral formulation
Risperidone LAI	Risperdal Consta®	SGA LAI	Maintenance injection
Ziprasidone	Geodon®	SGA	Adjunctive maintenance

Other Treatment Options

- Certain antipsychotic medications for mood stabilization
- Treatment for sleep disturbances
- Psychotherapy or counseling
- Regular routines and sleep hygiene

Diagnostic Tests Your Healthcare Team May Use

Clinical Evaluation

- Detailed psychiatric and medical history
- Evaluation of mood patterns over time
- Cognitive screening if memory concerns are present

Laboratory Tests

- Blood tests to monitor medication levels (such as lithium or valproate)
- Tests to monitor kidney, liver, and thyroid function when using certain medications

Imaging Studies

- Brain imaging such as MRI or CT may be used if symptoms suggest another neurological condition.

Planning for the Future

Healthcare Planning

- Maintain regular psychiatric follow-up
- Take medications consistently as prescribed
- Maintain regular sleep and daily routines
- Monitor for early warning signs of mood episodes

Legal & Financial Planning

- Ensure healthcare directives and power of attorney documents are updated
- Plan for additional support if mood episodes interfere with daily functioning

Support for Caregivers

- Learn to recognize early warning signs of mania or depression
- Encourage medication adherence and regular sleep schedules
- Provide support during mood episodes
- Seek professional help if symptoms worsen

National Organizations & Resources

- ✓ Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance

☎ 800-826-3632 | 🌐 dbsalliance.org

- ✓ National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

☎ 301-443-4513 | 🌐 nimh.nih.gov

- ✓ National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

☎ 800-950-6264 | 🌐 nami.org

- ✓ Eldercare Locator

☎ 1-800-677-1116 | 🌐 eldercare.acl.gov

Final Notes

- Bipolar disorder can occur or persist in later life.
- With appropriate treatment, many people maintain stable mood and good functioning.
- Early recognition of mood changes helps prevent severe episodes.