WHAT IS IT?
● Bipolar disorder is also known as manic depression.
● Unlike the normal ups and downs of life, a person with bipolar disorder will experience extreme changes in mood, which alternate between periods of mania and deep depression, interspersed with symptom-free periods.
● It is hard for people with bipolar disorder to function in society and it can result in damaged personal relationships, poor performance at work and even suicide.

AETIOLOGY
● Most experts agree that many factors interact to cause the condition.
● It seems likely that there is a genetic component, as it appears to run in families. Research has shown that if one twin has bipolar disorder, the other twin is more likely than another sibling to develop it (National Institute of Mental Health Genetics Workgroup, 1998).
● As well as personality traits, stresses in the person’s environment such as death, separation and divorce, play a part. These can ‘trigger’ the genetic component and result in the development of bipolar disorder.

SYMPTOMS OF MANIA
● Unusually high, euphoric mood.
● Irritability.
● Inability to concentrate.
● Increased levels of energy and restlessness.
● Talking very fast, having lots of ideas and switching rapidly from one idea to another.
● Inappropriate assessment of one’s powers or abilities.
● Ability to go without sleep.
● Increased libido.
● Intrusive behaviour – the person may not respect another’s physical space or inappropriately interpret the significance of relationships.
● Lack of judgement – the person may spend all of their savings or suddenly decide to redecorate.

SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION
● Feelings of worthlessness.
● Restlessness and irritability.
● Loss of interest in activities and pleasurable pursuits.
● Loss of libido.
● Persistent sad or low mood.
● Suicidal thoughts/actions.
● Feelings of hopelessness.
● Difficulty in sleeping.
● Loss of energy, feelings of fatigue.
● Difficulty concentrating or in making decisions.
● Loss of appetite.

INCIDENCE
● It is estimated that one per cent of the population will experience bipolar disorder (Bland, 1997).
● Most people with bipolar disorder develop the condition in their late teenage years or in early adulthood.

TREATMENT
● Most people with bipolar disorder can achieve relief through consistent treatment aimed at stabilising moods.
● A group of medications known as ‘mood stabilisers’ are the usual treatment for bipolar disorder. The most commonly prescribed of these drugs is lithium.
● For those who do not respond to lithium there are other drugs that can be effective, such as the anticonvulsants valproate and carbamazepine, and which may be combined with lithium for maximum effect.
● Treatment with drugs should always be combined with some form of psychosocial therapy to provide support and guidance to people with bipolar disorder. These include cognitive behavioural therapy, which can help people change negative thought patterns, and family therapy, which can help resolve tensions within the family that can arise from the person’s symptoms.

REFERENCES

National Institute of Mental Health Genetics Workgroup (1998) Genetics and Mental Disorders. Rockville, MD: NIMH.

WEBSITES
BBC’s ‘Your Health’ web pages: www.bbc.co.uk/health/mental/disorders_bipolar.shtml

Mind information booklet on manic depression: www.mind.org.uk/Information/Booklets/Understanding/index.htm