Bipolar Disorder is a mental illness in which people can go between periods of elevated or ‘high’ moods (mania) and depressed or ‘low’ moods (depression). The ‘mood swings’ between mania and depression can happen very quickly or they may be separated by periods of stable or ‘normal’ mood.

**Bipolar Disorder** (formerly known as manic depression) is an illness that arises from an imbalance of chemicals in the brain. While everyone experiences periods of sadness and happiness during their lives, people who live with Bipolar Disorder feel these mood changes (referred to as episodes or cycles) at a heightened or exaggerated level. Bipolar Disorder affects women and men equally with onset usually occurring between the ages of 15 and 25. Approximately 2 in 100 people will develop Bipolar Disorder in their lifetime.

**Types of Bipolar Disorder**
- Bipolar Disorder Type I – at least one manic episode usually, but not always, accompanied by periods of major depression.
- Bipolar Disorder Type II - alternating episodes of depression and high energy levels/impulsiveness that don’t quite reach full mania. These are referred to as hypomania.
- Cyclothymia - a milder form of Bipolar Disorder that involves less severe mood swings.

**Symptoms**
During the manic phase of Bipolar Disorder, which can last from days to months, symptoms can include:
- little need for sleep
- racing thoughts
- talking a lot
- grandiose thinking
- increased energy
- excessive activity
- elevated mood
- poor judgment
- binge eating/drinking
- impulsive behaviour.

Symptoms of hypomania are similar but less extreme.

During the depressive phase of Bipolar Disorder, symptoms can include:
- loss of appetite and weight loss
- overeating and weight gain
- difficulty concentrating, making decisions or remembering
- fatigue/lack of energy
- daily sadness or low mood
- thoughts of death and suicide
- low self-esteem
- too much or too little sleep
- persistent feelings of worthlessness, guilt or hopelessness
- loss of pleasure in activities once enjoyed.

**Causes**
There is still no clear explanation of what actually causes Bipolar Disorder however it is suspected that the condition may involve genetic, physical and environmental components.

For people with Bipolar Disorder, a manic episode may be triggered by:
- times of sleeplessness
- medications such as steroids or antidepressants
- life changes (eg childbirth)
- recreational drug use.

**Medications known as mood stabilisers are commonly used in the treatment of Bipolar Disorder.**

Antipsychotic, antianxiety and antidepressant medications can also be used to manage symptoms of Bipolar Disorder.

For people who are experiencing severe depressive or manic episodes, or who are experiencing psychotic phenomena associated with the illness, admission to hospital may be required.

**References**