

Treating bipolarity tougher in childhood

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Bipolar disorder is a more severe illness for kids than adults during the first few years after diagnosis, a landmark study released this week suggests.

The first research tracking a large group of bipolar children and teenagers finds that 2 1/2 years after diagnosis:

- Nearly a third haven't recovered.
- The remainder take about 17 months to recover.
- Four out of five have at least one recurrence.

Children experienced serious symptoms about two-thirds of the time, says Dr. Boris Birmaher of the University of Pittsburgh Medical School, the psychiatry professor who led the study.

"They spend more time ill than adults with the same disease."

The study of 300 children ages 7 to 18 was released at an American Psychiatric Association meeting in Atlanta.

A key hurdle to getting better is that children cycle through manic and depressed moods much more rapidly than adults, making it tough to keep them on the right medication, Birmaher says. Children in the study averaged 16 cycles of mood changes a year; adults average 3 1/2 changes.

"Some kids do well, nonetheless, but it's a difficult disease to treat," he said.

There are no solid figures on how many children and teens have the illness, also called manic depression.

About 1 percent of adults, or 2 million Americans, have it, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. It has a strong genetic link, but not all cases are genetic. Much less is known about it in children.

The bleak portrait painted by Birmaher "unfortunately rings true for parents around the country," says Lisa Pedersen, research chair of the Child and Adolescent Bipolar Foundation, a nonprofit education and support group (www.bpkids.org).

In fact, problems may be understated; the study defines recovery as at least eight consecutive weeks with few or no symptoms. "I don't know any parent who would term eight weeks a recovery," she said.

Children with bipolar disorder often are misdiagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or other problems, which delays proper treatment, Petersen says.

And the stimulants and/or antidepressants used to treat ADHD can worsen their symptoms.

On the other hand, as awareness of the disease grows, more children with ADHD are being misdiagnosed as bipolar, says Dr. Lori Altshuler, a psychiatrist specializing in manic depression at the UCLA Neuropsychiatric Institute.

About 15 percent of adults have the "rapid-cycling" form evidently more common in children, "and that's the most difficult to treat in adults," she says. A few newer anti-convulsive drugs are showing promise as effective for such adults, but they have not been tested in kids, Altshuler says.

The new evidence on children "creates a pressure to find more drugs that work well in the rapid-cycling disease."