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Having parents with bipolar disorder associated with increased risk of psychiatric disorders

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Children and teens of parents with bipolar disorder appear to have an increased risk of early-onset bipolar disorder, mood disorders and anxiety disorders, according to a report in the March issue of *Archives of General Psychiatry*.

As many as 60 percent of patients with bipolar disorder experience symptoms before age 21, according to background information in the article. Identifying the condition early may improve long-term outcomes, potentially preventing high psychosocial and medical costs. Having family members with bipolar disorder is the best predictor of whether an individual will go on to develop the condition, the authors note. "Therefore, carefully evaluating and prospectively following the psychopathology of offspring of parents with bipolar disorder and comparing them with offspring of parents with and without non-bipolar disorder psychopathology, are critical for identifying the early clinical presentation of bipolar disorder," they write.

Boris Birmaher, M.D., of Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, and colleagues compared 388 offspring (ages 6 to 18) of 233 parents with bipolar disorder to 251 offspring of 143 demographically matched control parents. Parents were assessed for psychiatric disorders, family psychiatric history, family environment and other variables, and were also interviewed about their children. Children were assessed directly for bipolar disorder and other

psychiatric disorders by researchers who did not know their parents' diagnoses.

Compared with the offspring of control parents, children of parents with bipolar disorder had an increased risk of having a bipolar spectrum disorder (41 or 10.6 percent vs. two or 0.8 percent) and having any mood or anxiety disorder. Children in families where both parents had bipolar disorders also were more likely than those in families containing one parent with bipolar disorder to develop the condition (four of 14 or 28.6 percent vs. 37 of 374 or 9.9 percent); however, their risk for other psychiatric disorders was the same as offspring of one parent with bipolar disorder.

"Consistent with the literature, most parents with bipolar disorder recollected that their illness started before age 20 years and about 20 percent had illness that started before age 13 years," the authors write. "In contrast, most of their children developed their first bipolar disorder episode before age 12 years, suggesting the possibility that parents were more perceptive of their children's symptoms early in life or perhaps that bipolar disorder has more penetrance and manifests earlier in new generations."

More information: Arch Gen Psychiatry. 2009;66[3]:287-296.

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