

# Seven Ways to Prevent Bipolar

While medications are essential for preventing bipolar, it can be frustrating when medications don't work fully. Lifestyle factors can help them work better; the ones below actually change the brain in ways that enhance the effects of medication and improve your chance of full recovery:

❶ **Keep a regular schedule.** Engaging in daily rituals at the same time each day (within half-an-hour) will help regulate your neurohormones and reduce your risk of mood swings by 50%. The four activities that are most critical to your body's clock are: the time you rise out of bed, the time you start work or chores, the time you start interacting with other people, and the time you eat dinner.

❷ **Regular sleep.** Focus on regularity in your sleep rather than quantity. Surprisingly, researchers have found that waking at regular times, and staying out of bed during the day, is much more important for preventing bipolar than trying to fall asleep at the same time. This means it's better to go to bed when tired than to try to force yourself to sleep, and you shouldn't try to catch up on missed sleep by napping during the day. If you have trouble waking, invest in a dawn simulator, which will gradually turn on the lights in the morning. These devices improve alertness and make it easier to get out of bed ([www.cet.org](http://www.cet.org)).

❸ **Follow the sun.** Light sets our circadian rhythm, which tends to be off in people with bipolar disorder. Follow the natural rhythms of the sun (bright light in the morning and darkness at night) as closely as you can. Evening light can trigger mania, especially blue-light which radiates from electronic screens. There's a free program that adjusts the blue-light on

your computer screen as the sun rises and sets ([justgetflux.com](http://justgetflux.com)); other blue-light filters are available at [www.lowbluelights.com](http://www.lowbluelights.com).

❹ **Monitor your moods.** A daily mood chart can help you catch early warning signs & help your doctor understand how your medications are working. There are free paper and smart-phone versions available at [www.moodtreatmentcenter.com/selfmonitoring.htm](http://www.moodtreatmentcenter.com/selfmonitoring.htm)

❺ **Consider salmon.** Two servings a week of this omega-3-rich fish can reduce depression and mood swings. Alternatively, you can take omega-3 in capsule form (recommended brands at: [www.moodtreatmentcenter.com/omega3.pdf](http://www.moodtreatmentcenter.com/omega3.pdf)).

❻ **Light exercise.** Regular aerobic exercise treats depression and helps protect brain cells in the mood center. Walking briskly for 30 minutes a day is enough to get this effect.

❼ **Build a social network.** It's no wonder that medications work better when we are around supportive people: that kind of support actually changes the brain. It doesn't have to be a huge crowd (too much social excitement can actually trigger mania), but at least a few supportive friends and family members.

## How it works in the brain

As you make these changes, don't expect too much at first: the benefits usually build up gradually over 3-6 weeks (much like fertilizing a garden). Sometimes you'll find that taking one of these steps does nothing, but that making several changes allows everything to fall into place. That's how the brain works. As an analogy, consider opening a door: you have to both unlock it *and* turn the handle to make it open. Doing one without the other does nothing.

—Chris Aiken, MD, adapted from *Bipolar, Not So Much* (Aiken & Phelps, WW Norton, 2017)

