

Health Tips for Parents

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Does my child have a mood disorder?

All children become cranky and irritable at times, but children who suddenly experience intense moodiness that lasts for several days or who seem chronically irritable or angry should be evaluated.



Mood disorders are serious illnesses



characterized by extreme emotional states that can cause severe behavioral problems, poor school performance and difficulties with

relationships. While most children experience occasional moodiness, mood disorders are rare in children, affecting fewer than 4 percent between the ages of 8 and 15.

Mood disorders can be episodic or chronic

The most common types of episodic mood disorders are depression, marked by a sudden onset of deep sadness lasting for a week or more, and bipolar disorder, which includes distinct episodes of elation or elevated mood that is different from usual.

Children who seem chronically cranky or irritable may suffer from a mood disorder

known as Severe Mood Dysregulation, which occurs most frequently with children also diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and Oppositional Defiant Disorder.

Normal behavior vs. mood disorder

“All of these mood disorders need to be distinguished from normal development,” says James McGough, MD, a child psychiatrist at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA. “It’s normal for children who are 10 to 13 years old to be somewhat oppositional or non-compliant with their parents. If a child is surly at the dinner table but otherwise has good grades, healthy friends and engages in healthy activities, I wouldn’t worry about a mood disorder.”

Medication and psychosocial therapy can help control symptoms of mood disorders. Parents may want to seek help from a mental health professional for an evaluation.

Depression versus mania

Signs of depression:

- A period of sudden sadness
- Loss of interest in sports, music or other activities
- Unexpected decline in grades
- Talks about hurting him or herself or suddenly starts talking about death or suicide

Signs of mania:

- Elevated or elated moods lasting 4-5 days
- Gradually needs less sleep but is still very energized
- Talks fast, has racing thoughts
- Increased interest in sex or preoccupied with grandiose ideas or superpowers



UCLA offers mood disorders program

UCLA’s Child and Adolescent Mood Disorders Program (CHAMP) provides diagnostic evaluations, second-opinion consultations and short-term treatment for youth with mood disorder symptoms and their families. Visit www.semel.ucla.edu/champ or call (310) 825-2836 for information on the CHAMP Program.

This information is provided courtesy of the pediatricians at Mattel Children’s Hospital UCLA. UCLA Health pediatricians are conveniently located in your neighborhood: Westwood, Brentwood, Manhattan Beach, Santa Monica and West Los Angeles. All health and health-related information contained in this publication is intended to be general in nature and should not be used as a substitute for a visit with a healthcare professional. **Subscribe to Health Tips for Parents at uclahealth.org/eneews.**