

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN BIPOLAR DISORDER AND THYROID MALFUNCTIONS: REVIEW ARTICLE

Mohammed Salah Hussein*¹, Abeer Nasser Al Ghalbi², Abdullah Mohammed Alzahrani³, Zabarah Ali Ghaneem⁴, Alwaleed Mohammed Altuwajri⁵, Waleed Khalid Aljasser⁶, Muteb Khalid Alotaibi⁷, Albaz, Abdullah Moteb A Albaz⁸, Ahmed Hesham Alsahhaf⁹, Abdullah Osama Kentab¹⁰, Almalki, Zuhair Mofareh B¹¹

¹Doctor of Gastroenterology and Endoscopy, Department of Gastroenterology and Endoscopy, Dr. Samir Abbas Hospital, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia; ²Family Medicine Lecturer and Family Medicine Resident, Taif University, Faculty of Medicine, Saudi Arabia; ³General Practitioner, King Fahd General Hospital, Jeddah Saudi Arabia; ⁴Medical Intern, King Khalid Hospital, Najran, Saudi Arabia; ⁵Intern in Medicine, King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences, Riyadh; ⁶Medical Intern, King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences, Saudi Arabia; ⁷General Physician, Moh Alahsa Health Cluster, Saudi Arabia; ⁸Medical Intern, King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences, Saudi Arabia; ⁹Intern, King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences, Riyadh; ¹⁰Medical Intern, King Saud bin Abdulaziz University for Health Sciences, Riyadh

Abstract

Bipolar disorder and thyroid dysfunctions often exhibit a complex interplay that can influence the clinical presentation and treatment outcomes for affected individuals. Research indicates that thyroid hormones play a crucial role in mood regulation, and fluctuations in thyroid function can exacerbate or mimic the symptoms of bipolar disorder. For instance, hyperthyroidism, characterized by elevated levels of thyroid hormones, can lead to manic or hypomanic episodes, while hypothyroidism, which involves decreased hormone production, can result in depressive symptoms. This intricate relationship necessitates a comprehensive assessment of thyroid function in patients diagnosed with bipolar disorder to address any potential hormonal imbalances that may worsen mood stability. Moreover, the treatment of bipolar disorder may require careful management of thyroid conditions, as certain mood stabilizers and antidepressants can impact thyroid hormone levels. Medications such as lithium, commonly used to treat bipolar disorder, have been documented to both influence thyroid function and require ongoing monitoring for thyroid-related side effects. Consequently, healthcare providers should conduct thorough evaluations of thyroid function for individuals with bipolar disorder throughout their treatment journey. Effective management strategies should include a collaborative approach involving both psychiatric and endocrinological assessments to optimize overall mental and physical health.

Keywords: Bipolar disorder, thyroid dysfunction, mood regulation, hyperthyroidism, hypothyroidism, manic episodes, depressive symptoms

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*Corresponding Author: Mohammed Salah Hussein, Doctor of Gastroenterology and Endoscopy, Department of Gastroenterology and Endoscopy, Dr. Samir Abbas Hospital, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Correo-e: dr_msalahali@yahoo.com

Introduction

Bipolar disorder and thyroid malfunctions are two distinct medical conditions that can significantly affect an individual's mental and physical health. Bipolar disorder, a mood disorder characterized by alternating episodes of mania, hypomania, and depression, impacts approximately 1-3% of the global population [1]. Thyroid disorders, encompassing a broad range of conditions like hypothyroidism (underactive thyroid) and hyperthyroidism (overactive thyroid), affect millions as well, with a prevalence of about 4.6% in the United States alone. Both conditions can arise independently but exhibit a complex interplay that has profound implications for diagnosis, treatment, and overall patient well-being [2].

Bipolar disorder is classified into several types, with the main categories being Bipolar I, Bipolar II, and Cyclothymic Disorder. The fluctuating mood states in bipolar disorder can have devastating consequences on personal relationships, work performance, and overall quality of life. Patients often experience intense mood changes ranging from euphoric highs (mania or hypomania) to debilitating lows (depression). The exact etiology of bipolar disorder remains uncertain, but genetic, neurobiological, and environmental factors are believed to contribute to its development [3].

Individuals facing bipolar disorder often display emotional dysregulation, which can be exacerbated by external stressors, including medical comorbidities. As such, there is increasing recognition of the potential interplay between mood disorders, like bipolar disorder, and hormonal imbalances caused by thyroid disorders [4].

The thyroid gland produces several hormones, notably thyroxine (T4) and triiodothyronine (T3), that regulate metabolism, energy levels, and overall bodily functions. Thyroid hormones are also vital for brain development and functioning. When these hormones are imbalanced, either as a result of an underactive thyroid (hypothyroidism) or an overactive thyroid (hyperthyroidism), a variety of mental health issues may arise, including mood swings, anxiety, and depression [5].

Hypothyroidism has been particularly linked with depressive symptoms, often leading to misdiagnosis of these issues as primary mood disorders. In contrast, hyperthyroidism can induce symptoms such as anxiety, jitteriness, irritability, and in some cases, manic-like symptoms. This overlap can create diagnostic dilemmas for healthcare providers, leading to potentially ineffective treatment strategies that fail to address the underlying thyroid issues [6].

Research indicates that thyroid dysfunction may influence the course and severity of bipolar disorder. Various studies have noted abnormalities in thyroid hormone levels among individuals with bipolar disorder. For instance, patients with bipolar disorder, particularly those experiencing depressive episodes, can present with lower serum levels of thyroid hormones. Conversely, individuals with hyperthyroidism may display symptoms mimicking mania, such as increased energy and restlessness [7].

The relationship is bidirectional. Just as thyroid disorders can exacerbate or mimic symptoms of bipolar disorder, it is also understood that individuals with bipolar disorder are at a heightened risk for developing thyroid dysfunction. The glucocorticoid response activated during mood episodes may lead to alterations in the hypothalamic-pituitary-thyroid (HPT) axis, which is crucial for maintaining balance in thyroid hormone regulation. Additionally, certain psychotropic medications used in the treatment of bipolar disorder can impact thyroid function. Lithium, a common treatment for mania, has been associated with hypothyroidism in long-term users, requiring regular thyroid function monitoring [8].

The overlapping symptoms of thyroid dysfunction and bipolar disorder complicate accurate diagnosis. Mood instability, anxiety, fatigue, and changes in weight or appetite may arise from both conditions, often resulting in patients receiving fragmented care or inappropriate treatments. For example, a patient presenting with depressive symptoms may receive an antidepressant without consideration of possible thyroid abnormalities. If thyroid dysfunction remains undiagnosed and untreated, it could lead to poor response to mood stabilization treatments, aggravating the patient's condition [9].

Consequently, it is essential for clinicians to assess thyroid function when evaluating individuals with bipolar disorder, particularly if symptoms appear resistant to typical treatments. A thorough evaluation involving thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) tests and free T4/T3 assessments can lead to more comprehensive care and better outcomes [10].

The interplay between bipolar disorder and thyroid dysfunction highlights the necessity for an integrated treatment approach. Addressing both conditions simultaneously can result in improved mental health outcomes. Management of thyroid disorders can alleviate mood symptoms, while stabilization of bipolar symptoms can allow for more effective thyroid treatment [11].

When treating individuals with bipolar disorder who also present with thyroid dysfunction, clinicians need to adopt a multidisciplinary approach. This may

include the collaboration of psychiatrists, endocrinologists, and primary care providers to ensure a holistic understanding of the patient's health. Treatment principles may involve using mood stabilizers like lithium with careful monitoring of thyroid function, opting for antidepressants with a lower risk of inducing manic symptoms, and managing thyroid hormone replacement therapy carefully to avoid exacerbating mood swings [12].

Prevalence and Epidemiology.

Bipolar disorder is estimated to affect approximately 1-3% of the global population at some point in their lives, according to various studies. The lifetime prevalence is notably similar across different countries and cultures, suggesting a stable prevalence that transcends geographic boundaries. Interestingly, research indicates that there may be a slight variation in prevalence between genders; while men are more likely to develop bipolar I disorder, women tend to experience more episodes of depression and a greater likelihood of rapid cycling between mood states [13].

The onset of bipolar disorder typically occurs in late adolescence or early adulthood, with symptoms often emerging in individuals between the ages of 15 and 24. However, it is crucial to note that the disorder can present later in life. Bipolar disorder not only affects individuals personally but also imposes significant social and economic burdens, leading to increased rates of substance use, suicide, and comorbid psychiatric conditions [14].

The epidemiological landscape of bipolar disorder reveals its complex interactions with various demographic and socioeconomic factors. Disparities in access to mental health care, stigma, and cultural perceptions of mental illness significantly impact diagnosis and treatment across different populations. Research has shown that individuals from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds may experience a greater prevalence of bipolar disorder. However, studies also highlight that bipolar disorder often goes underdiagnosed or misdiagnosed, particularly in populations presenting with co-occurring conditions [15].

Moreover, the impact of environmental factors, such as trauma, stress, and socioeconomic instability, has been documented in fostering the onset of bipolar disorder symptoms. Genetic predispositions coupled with environmental triggers can culminate in the manifestation of the disorder, affirming the need for a biopsychosocial framework in addressing mental health challenges [16].

Thyroid disorders present a different yet also significant public health concern, affecting an estimated 4.6% of the U.S. population, as per the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK). The two most common disorders—hypothyroidism (an underactive thyroid) and hyperthyroidism (an overactive thyroid)—exhibit distinct prevalence patterns. Hypothyroidism, often attributed to autoimmune conditions like Hashimoto's thyroiditis, is more prevalent in women than men and usually affects older adults. Conversely, hyperthyroidism, commonly associated with Graves' disease, also has a higher prevalence among women but may present earlier in life [17].

Thyroid disorders often go undetected due to asymptomatic phases or misinterpretation of symptoms as stress or aging. It is estimated that approximately 60% of those with thyroid disorders remain unaware of their conditions. The prevalence of thyroid disorders varies globally, influenced by factors such as iodine deficiency, urbanization, and genetic susceptibility [18].

The epidemiological profile of thyroid disorders reveals marked variations across different populations. Regions with insufficient iodine intake continue to report high rates of goiter and hypothyroidism. The global health initiatives to fortify salt with iodine have significantly decreased the prevalence of iodine deficiency, but some populations in rural areas still experience higher rates of thyroid disorders [19].

Age and gender further influence the risk of developing thyroid disorders, with women being five to eight times more likely to develop thyroid diseases than men, particularly during pregnancy and menopause. Additionally, the prevalence of thyroid disorders is notably higher among individuals with a family history of autoimmune diseases, indicating a significant genetic component [20].

Pathophysiology

The thyroid gland, located in the neck, produces thyroid hormones that regulate various bodily functions. T4 is synthesized as a prohormone and converted into the more active T3 within tissues. These hormones bind to specific nuclear receptors, altering gene expression to influence metabolic rates, energy production, and protein synthesis. Furthermore, thyroid hormones are pivotal in brain development, maintenance, and neuroplasticity, which play a vital role in mood regulation and mental health [21].

A myriad of research has established a connection between thyroid dysfunction—particularly hypothyroidism and hyperthyroidism—and mood

disorders, including depression and anxiety. Hypothyroidism, characterized by insufficient levels of thyroid hormones, presents with symptoms such as fatigue, weight gain, cognitive impairment, and depressive mood. Clinically, patients with hypothyroidism often exhibit mood disturbances, which can occur even independently of the more typical physical manifestations [22].

Conversely, hyperthyroidism arises from excessive production of thyroid hormones, leading to symptoms such as weight loss, irritability, anxiety, and hyperactivity. The emotional dysregulation seen in individuals with hyperthyroidism can mimic or exacerbate existing mood disorders. Therefore, recognizing and treating thyroid dysfunction is critical in managing mood disorders and improving overall mental health outcomes [23].

The underlying neurobiological mechanisms through which thyroid hormones influence mood are complex and multifaceted. Thyroid hormones are known to modulate neurotransmitter systems critical for mood regulation, including serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine. For instance, studies have indicated that T3 enhances serotonin synthesis and receptor sensitivity in the brain, thereby promoting mood stabilization. Serotonin, often dubbed the "feel-good" neurotransmitter, plays a pivotal role in regulating mood, anxiety, and overall emotional well-being [24].

Additionally, thyroid hormones are crucial for neurogenesis, the process by which new neurons are formed. This is particularly relevant in regions of the brain such as the hippocampus, which is intimately involved in mood regulation and cognitive function. Reduced levels of thyroid hormones are associated with decreased neurogenesis, potentially leading to the cognitive and emotional impairments frequently observed in mood disorders [25].

Moreover, thyroid hormones may exert anti-inflammatory effects that impact mood regulation. Recent studies have elucidated the bidirectional relationship between inflammation and mood disorders, suggesting that elevated inflammatory markers are often present in individuals with depression and anxiety. Thyroid hormones have been shown to modulate immune responses and reduce inflammatory processes, thereby potentially mitigating some symptoms associated with mood disorders [26].

Given the significant relationship between thyroid hormones and mood, clinical implications are profound. Screening for thyroid dysfunction should be an integral part of the evaluation process for individuals presenting with mood disorders, especially when symptoms are atypical or resistant to conventional depression and anxiety treatments. Thyroid function tests, including serum measurements of TSH (thyroid-stimulating hormone), T4, and T3, can help elucidate underlying thyroid issues contributing to mood dysregulation [27].

In instances where thyroid dysfunction is identified, appropriate treatment—whether through hormone replacement therapy for hypothyroidism or antithyroid medications for hyperthyroidism—can lead to substantial improvements in mood and overall quality of life. The normalization of thyroid hormone levels can alleviate many affective symptoms, underscoring the need for an integrative approach that addresses both hormonal and psychological components of mood disorders [28].

The Role of Thyroid Hormones in Mood Regulation

At the core of thyroid function is the hypothalamic-pituitary-thyroid axis, a complex feedback loop that regulates hormone production. The hypothalamus releases thyrotropin-releasing hormone (TRH), which prompts the pituitary gland to secrete thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH). TSH, in turn, stimulates the thyroid gland to produce T3 and T4. Of the two hormones, T4 is primarily produced and acts as a precursor, while T3 is the more biologically active form, responsible for interacting with various receptors throughout the body and influencing metabolic processes [29].

Thyroid hormones exert their effects on nearly every tissue in the body, and they do so by influencing gene expression, neuronal function, and neurotransmitter synthesis and degradation, all of which can significantly influence mood. The relationship between thyroid hormones and mood regulation is manifold, involving both physiological and psychological dimensions [30].

One of the mechanisms through which thyroid hormones influence mood is their role in the regulation of neurotransmitters, the chemical messengers that facilitate communication between neurons. Neurotransmitters such as serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine are integral to mood regulation and emotional stability. Research has shown that thyroid hormones can enhance the sensitivity of serotonin receptors, thereby potentially increasing the mood-enhancing effects of this neurotransmitter. Conversely, low levels of thyroid hormones have been associated with decreased serotonin activity, contributing to symptoms of depression and anxiety [31].

Dopamine, another key player in mood and emotional regulation, is similarly influenced by thyroid hormones. Studies indicate that T3 can promote the synthesis of dopamine and enhance its release, which may, in turn, facilitate mood elevation and overall emotional well-being. Norepinephrine, known for

its role in arousal and stress responses, is also modulated by thyroid hormones, as altered thyroid states can affect the levels of this neurotransmitter, thus influencing mood and anxiety levels [32].

Thyroid disorders, particularly hypothyroidism and hyperthyroidism, provide clear evidence of the link between thyroid hormones and mood regulation. Hypothyroidism, characterized by insufficient production of thyroid hormones, can lead to a range of psychological symptoms, including depression, lethargy, and cognitive dysfunction. Patients with hypothyroidism often report increased feelings of sadness, diminished mental clarity, and a general lack of motivation. Additionally, the slow metabolic rate associated with hypothyroidism can contribute to decreased energy levels, further exacerbating feelings of depression [33].

Conversely, hyperthyroidism, wherein excessive thyroid hormones circulate in the bloodstream, is associated with anxiety, irritability, and mood swings. Individuals with hyperthyroidism may experience heightened nervousness and restlessness, conditions contrasted with the sluggishness of hypothyroidism. The interplay of these opposing outcomes emphasizes the delicate balance maintained by thyroid hormones and their impact on mood [34].

Another crucial aspect of the interaction between thyroid hormones and mood involves the body's stress response. Chronic stress is known to dysregulate endocrine function, impacting cortisol levels and overall hormonal balance. Thyroid hormones coalesce with the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, which is responsible for managing stress responses. Dysregulation within this system can lead to mood disturbances, with both elevated and decreased thyroid hormone levels being implicated in stress-related mood disorders [35].

Thyroid hormones may also play a role in the resilience or vulnerability of individuals to stress-related mood disorders. Research has indicated that individuals who are genetically predisposed to thyroid dysfunction may exhibit greater emotional volatility in response to stressors, potentially exacerbating mood disorders [36].

The recognition of the role of thyroid hormones in mood regulation carries significant implications for treatment approaches in mental health. Clinicians often advocate for comprehensive evaluations of thyroid function in patients presenting with mood disturbances. Treating underlying thyroid disorders can have profound effects on mood stabilization and overall mental health. For instance, patients diagnosed with depression who are subsequently found to have hypothyroidism may experience marked improvement in depressive symptoms following appropriate thyroid hormone replacement therapy [37].

Conversely, the use of thyroid hormone supplementation is being explored in conjunction with traditional antidepressant strategies, particularly in cases where patients exhibit resistance to standard treatments. Preliminary research suggests that augmenting conventional antidepressants with thyroid hormones may enhance therapeutic outcomes for specific individuals, though this approach necessitates careful monitoring to avoid complications associated with improper hormone levels [38].

Diagnosing Thyroid Dysfunction in Bipolar Patients

Diagnosing thyroid dysfunction in bipolar patients can be fraught with challenges. The overlapping symptoms of mood disorders and thyroid dysfunction may obscure clear clinical indications of thyroid issues. For instance, symptoms of hypothyroidism, such as fatigue, weight gain, and cognitive impairment, may mimic depressive episodes, whereas hyperthyroidism can lead to anxiety and insomnia, reminiscent of manic symptoms. This symptom overlap necessitates a careful and thorough assessment to differentiate between mood disorder-related symptoms and those stemming from thyroid dysfunction [39].

Furthermore, the diagnostic process can be complicated by the variations in presentation of thyroid dysfunction. Some patients may exhibit subclinical thyroid dysfunction, where thyroid hormone levels fall within the normal range, yet symptoms of thyroid imbalance are present. Physicians must be vigilant in recognizing these subtleties to ensure accurate diagnosis and appropriate treatment [40].

The diagnostic approach typically involves a combination of clinical assessment, laboratory testing, and patient history. Standard laboratory tests for thyroid dysfunction include measuring serum thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) and free thyroxine (FT4) levels. Elevated TSH levels with low FT4 can indicate hypothyroidism, while suppressed TSH with elevated FT4 or triiodothyronine (T3) levels can indicate hyperthyroidism. However, interpreting these results in the context of bipolar disorder requires careful consideration of the patient's overall clinical profile [41].

The management of thyroid dysfunction in bipolar patients necessitates an integrated approach to care. Mental health professionals, including psychiatrists, psychologists, and primary care physicians, must work collaboratively to ensure comprehensive assessment and treatment. Regular

monitoring of thyroid function is essential, particularly for patients undergoing treatment for bipolar disorder, as some mood stabilizers and antidepressants can affect thyroid hormone levels [42].

Current guidelines recommend periodic screening for thyroid dysfunction in individuals with bipolar disorder, particularly if they present with symptoms suggestive of thyroid issues or if there is a history of thyroid dysfunction in their family. Early identification and management of thyroid dysfunction can significantly enhance mood stabilization efforts and improve overall patient outcomes [43].

The treatment of thyroid dysfunction may involve hormone replacement therapy for hypothyroidism or antithyroid medications for hyperthyroidism. In many cases, the treatment of thyroid disorders can alleviate mood symptoms and improve the patient's quality of life, underscoring the crucial role of thyroid health in the management of bipolar disorder [44].

Genetic Links Between Thyroid Dysfunction and Bipolar Disorder

Bipolar disorder is frequently classified into several types, with Types I and II being the most recognized, distinguished primarily by the intensity and duration of depressive and manic episodes. BD has a substantial genetic component; studies suggest that the heritability of bipolar disorder may be as high as 80%. Several candidate genes have been implicated, notably those involved in neurotransmitter systems, circadian rhythms, and cellular signaling pathways [45].

The genetic architecture underlying bipolar disorder is complex, involving multiple genes and resulting in susceptibility that may be influenced by environmental stressors. Genetic overlaps with other psychiatric disorders, notably major depressive disorder (MDD) and schizophrenia, have also emerged in recent studies. This genetic interplay often highlights the role of certain biomarkers that could serve as potential indicators for the onset or exacerbation of bipolar symptoms [46].

Research has increasingly recognized a bidirectional relationship between thyroid dysfunction and bipolar disorder. On one hand, abnormalities in thyroid function may trigger or exacerbate mood episodes in individuals predisposed to bipolar disorder. On the other hand, mood disorders, particularly the depressive phases of bipolar disorder, can influence thyroid function [47].

1. **Thyroid Hormones and Mood Regulation** Several studies have indicated that alterations in thyroid hormone levels can contribute to mood dysregulation. Hypothyroidism, for instance, has been linked to depressive symptoms, and patients with BD often exhibit atypical presentations of mood disorders that can complicate diagnosis and treatment. Conversely, hyperthyroid states can lead to manic episodes, suggesting a direct influence of thyroid function on mood stabilization [48].

2. **Biomarkers as Indicators** Biomarkers are measurable indicators of biological processes, and the identification of specific thyroid hormones as potential biomarkers for BD may enhance diagnostic accuracy. For instance, aberrations in T3 and T4 levels can correlate with mood fluctuations in bipolar patients. Ongoing research aims to explore how monitoring these levels can inform treatment strategies, potentially improving outcomes by identifying the underlying physiological components linked with mood episodes [49].

3. **Genetic Studies and Findings** Recent genetic studies have pinpointed common genetic alleles associated with both thyroid conditions and bipolar disorder. For instance, variations in genes regulating thyroid hormone synthesis and signaling pathways may be present in individuals with a family history of bipolar disorder. The role of the deiodinase enzymes, which are critical in converting T4 to the more biologically active T3, has also sparked interest among researchers exploring genetic predispositions [50].

The intersection of thyroid dysfunction and bipolar disorder calls for a nuanced understanding within clinical settings. Early identification of thyroid abnormalities in patients with bipolar disorder can facilitate tailored therapeutic interventions. Conversely, managing thyroid dysfunction may alleviate some mood-related symptoms in susceptible individuals. Integrating regular thyroid function tests into the monitoring protocols for patients with bipolar disorder, especially in those experiencing mood destabilization, can promote better management of both conditions [51].

Moreover, emerging genetic testing technologies offer new avenues for personalized medicine, potentially allowing for the identification of individuals at higher risk for developing bipolar disorder due to thyroid dysfunction. Clinics that incorporate both psychological assessment and medical evaluation may achieve more holistic treatment outcomes [52].

Conclusion

The interplay between bipolar disorder and thyroid malfunctions underscores the complexity of mental health and highlights the interconnectedness of

bodily systems. Understanding how hormonal imbalances can influence mood regulation and psychiatric symptoms necessitates a comprehensive approach to diagnosis and treatment. As research continues to explore the relationship between these two conditions, there is hope for enhanced treatment modalities that recognize and address the multifaceted nature of mental health disorders. By fostering an integrative approach that emphasizes the connection between endocrine function and mental health, healthcare providers can improve outcomes for those affected by the dual challenges of bipolar disorder and thyroid dysfunction.

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