

Does mental illness run in families?

Sometimes there are a few people in a family who have the same mental illness. Other times only one person in the family has a mental illness. This factsheet looks at whether mental illness runs in families.

Key Points.

- Some research suggests that mental illness can run in families.
- We do not fully understand what causes mental illness, or why it can be passed on in family members.
- Mental illness may be passed on for different reasons, not just genes.
- Having a family member with a mental illness doesn't mean that you or a family member are also going to become unwell.
- There are things you can do to look after your mental health if you are worried about mental illness running in your family.

This factsheet covers:

1. [Will mental illness run in my family?](#)
2. [What causes mental illness to run in families?](#)
3. [What should I consider if I want to start a family?](#)
4. [What can I do to reduce my risk of developing a mental illness?](#)

1. Will mental illness run in my family?

If someone in your family has a mental illness, you might be worried about developing the same condition.

If you have a mental illness you might be worried that your children or siblings will develop the same or a different mental illness.

Most people with a mental illness do not have relatives with the same illness. But research does suggest that mental illness can run in families.¹

The table below shows the chances of schizophrenia or bipolar disorder being passed down through family members.² These numbers are based on recent studies. But different studies can show different numbers.

	Schizophrenia	Bipolar
Lifetime chance. This is the chance of someone in the general population developing the condition during their lifetime.	1 in 100	1 in 100
If one of your biological parents has the condition	6 in 100	10 in 100
If both of your biological parents have the condition	45 in 100	40 in 100
If your brother or sister has the condition	9 in 100	13 in 100
If your identical twin has the condition	40-50 in 100	40-70 in 100
If your non-identical twin has the condition	17 in 100	20 in 100
If a second degree relative has the condition. For example, your aunt, uncle or grandparent.	3 in 100	5 in 100

It might be helpful to look at the figures in the table in a different way. For example, the chance of someone developing bipolar disorder is 1 out of 100. This means that 99 people are not going to develop bipolar disorder.

If one of your parents has bipolar disorder, the chance of you not developing the condition is 90 out of 100. This means you are less likely to develop bipolar disorder, even if one of your parents has the condition.

Other research shows that different mental health conditions, such as schizoaffective disorder³ major depression,⁴ and anxiety⁵ can run in the same family. However, there is less evidence to show if other mental health conditions run in families.

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2. What causes mental illness to run in families?

We do not fully understand what causes mental illness. Or why it can be passed on in families.

When a condition is passed on in families through genes, it is called 'hereditary'.

As the table [above](#) shows, the chances of developing a mental illness could depend on you and your relatives' genes.

It does seem that mental illness can be hereditary. But we do not fully understand how this works. Mental illness may be passed on in family members for different reasons, not just genes.

John's story

John is an identical twin. This means he and his brother Sam have the exact same genes. This is why they look the same. John has depression, but his brother Sam has never had any mental health problems. If mental illness only had a genetic cause, then John and Sam would both have depression.

Environmental factors, like loneliness or a stressful life event, can cause mental illness. If you have a family history of mental illness you have a higher chance of developing mental illness in these situations.⁶

This doesn't mean that you will definitely develop a mental illness. People with no family history of mental illness can develop a mental illness too.

There are different ways of looking after your mental health, which are explained more in [Section 4](#) of this factsheet.

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3. What should I consider if I want to start a family?

If you have a mental illness, and you're thinking of starting a family, you could talk to a professional genetics' counsellor.

Genetic counsellors work directly with patients and families. They can give specialist advice and information to people who have relatives with certain health conditions.⁷

If you want to speak to a genetic counsellor, you will need to be referred by a doctor. So, you should speak to your GP or psychiatrist.⁸

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4. What can I do to reduce my risk of developing a mental illness?

Mental illness may run in families, but it doesn't mean that you or someone in your family will definitely become unwell.

If you have a family history of mental illness it can still help to take good care of your mental health. There are things you can do to look after your mental health. Below are some steps you can take.

Having a healthy diet

Eating a healthy, balanced diet is good for your mental and physical health.

Food can have a lasting effect on mental health. Your brain needs different nutrients to stay healthy and function well.⁹

To help improve mental wellbeing, you should try to eat a balanced and varied diet.¹⁰

If you are having issues maintaining a balanced diet, you can seek help from your GP.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is becoming more aware of your thoughts, feelings, body and world around you. Mindfulness can help improve mental wellbeing. It can also help you to notice signs of stress or anxiety and deal with them better.¹¹

The first step to mindfulness is to remind yourself to take notice of your thoughts, feelings, body and the world around you.

Other ways to practice mindfulness include picking a regular time each day where you try and be more aware of yourself and your surroundings. You could also try something new to help you notice the world around you in a new way. For example, you could try taking a new route to work.

Some people find it useful to name their thoughts and feelings to help develop their awareness. It can be also helpful to set aside some time each week to practice other types of mindfulness, such as yoga and meditation.¹²

Getting regular exercise

Regular exercise can help to improve your mood.¹³ It can also help you to feel better about yourself, relieves stress and helps you to get a better night's sleep.¹⁴

30 minutes of moderate exercise 5 times a week is enough. You can break this down into 2 lots of 15-minute sessions, or even 3 lots of 10-minute exercise sessions, if that's easier.¹⁵

Moderate exercise should raise your heartbeat and make you breathe faster. Moderate exercise includes brisk walking, swimming and riding a bike.¹⁶

You can find more information about **'Mental Illness and being active'** at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquires team on 0121 522 7007 for more information.

Getting enough sleep

The NHS recommends that adults get between 6 to 9 hours sleep a night. And keep to regular sleeping hours.¹⁷

Problems with sleep can affect how you feel physically and mentally.¹⁸ In turn, how you feel physically and mentally can also affect how you sleep.¹⁹ If you regularly have problems sleeping, then you should talk to your GP.

You can find more information about **'Sleep'** at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquires team on 0121 522 7007 for more information.

Connecting with others

Good relationships with other people are important for mental wellbeing. Connecting with other can help build a sense of belonging and self-worth, help you to chat about how you are feeling and provide emotional support.²⁰

If you do not want to speak to a friend or family member about how you are feeling, you could contact an emotional support line. Emotional support lines are listening services. Some emotional support services offer telephone, email, or instant messaging chat support. We have listed some emotional support lines in the ['Useful Contacts'](#) section of this factsheet.

Supporting others

Supporting other people can have a positive impact on our own mental health and wellbeing. Even small acts of kindness can make us feel good.

You can support others by volunteering for a local cause, helping a neighbour or by having a simple conversation with a friend or relative.²¹

Learn a new skill

Learning a new skill can have a positive impact on mental wellbeing. It can help boost self-confidence, help you connect with others, build a sense of purpose and support recovery.

There are lots of different ways to bring learning into your life. You could learn to cook something new, try a new hobby such as painting or learn how to do something practical like changing a car tire.^{22,23}

Stress

Try not to get too stressed. A lot of things in life can cause stress, which can impact your mental health. Sometimes stress cannot be avoided. But you may be able to use coping techniques to limit the effects of stress.

Drug and alcohol use

Using alcohol²⁴ or drugs²⁵ can cause mental illness in some people. Some people have told us it caused problems with getting the right treatment when they were unwell.

If you find that you use alcohol or drugs to deal with problems or stress, then you could try some of the options listed above. For example, if you feel stressed, you could try exercising, or talking to someone.

Speak to your GP if you are worried that you have signs of mental illness. Or if you are worried about your drug or alcohol use.

You can find more information about:

- Worried about your mental health?
- Stress
- Drugs, alcohol and mental health

at www.rethink.org. Or call our General Enquiries team on 0121 522 7007 and ask them to send you a copy of our factsheet.

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Useful Contacts

Sane Line

Specialist emotional support and information to anyone affected by mental illness.

Telephone: 0300 304 7000. Open 4.30pm-10.30pm, 7 days a week.

Address: SANE Services, St. Mark's Studios, 14 Chillingworth Road, London, N7 8QJ

Support forum: www.sane.org.uk/what_we_do/support/supportforum

Email: support@sane.org.uk

Website: www.sane.org.uk

Samaritans

Confidential support for people who are experiencing feelings of distress, despair, or suicidal thoughts.

Telephone: 116 123. Open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Address: Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Website: www.samaritans.org

CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably)

Emotional support specifically for men. Their helplines and webchat are open every day 5pm – midnight.

Telephone: 0800 58 58 58. Open 5pm – midnight, 365 days a year.

Address: CALM, PO Box 68766, London SE1P 4JZ

Webchat: www.thecalmzone.net/help/webchat

Website: www.thecalmzone.net

Silverline

Aimed at people over 55. The Silver Line operates the only confidential, free helpline for older people across the UK that's open 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days of the year.

Telephone: 0800 470 80 90. Open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Website: www.thesilverline.org.uk

The Mix

Confidential help for people under the age of 25. You can book telephone counselling on their website. They also have a webchat service and a crisis messenger service that you can text.

Telephone: 0808 808 4994. Open 4pm-11pm, 7 days a week.

Email: via website: www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team/email-us

Crisis messenger: text THEMIX to 85258

Website: www.themix.org.uk

SupportLine

Confidential emotional support for children, young adults, and adults.

Telephone: 01708 765200 (hours vary so ring for details)

Address: SupportLine, PO Box 2860, Romford, Essex RM7 1JA

Email: info@supportline.org.uk

Website: www.supportline.org.uk

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Last updated September 2020

Next update September 2023

Version 7

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Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0808 801 0525

Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm
(excluding bank holidays)

Email advice@rethink.org

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We'd love to know if this information helped you.

Drop us a line at: feedback@rethink.org

or write to us at Rethink Mental Illness:

RAIS
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or call us on 0808 801 0525

We're open 9:30am to 4pm
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Don't have access to the web?

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Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on 0808 801 0525 between 9:30am to 4pm, Monday to Friday. Our specialist advisers can help you with queries like how to apply for benefits, get access to care or make a complaint.

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