

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.
- Even though mental illness may run in families, having a family member with a mental illness doesn't mean that you or a family member is going to become unwell.
- There are things you can do to look after your mental health if you are worried about mental illness 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 condition as well.

If you have a mental illness you might be worried that your children or siblings will develop a 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 (the chance of someone in the general population developing the condition during their lifetime)	1 in 100	2-3 in 100
If one of your biological parents has the condition	13 in 100	15 in 100
If both of your biological parents have the condition	45 in 100	50 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	10-15 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 seems that different mental health conditions, such as schizoaffective disorder³ and major depression,⁴ can run in the same family. There is less evidence to show that other mental health conditions run in families.

You should remember that the chance of not developing a mental illness is much greater than the chance of developing one. This is true even if you have a relative with a mental illness.

You could look at the figures in the table the other way round. You can then see that the chance of someone not developing bipolar disorder is around 97 out of 100. If someone has one parent with bipolar disorder, the chance of not developing the condition is 85 out of 100.

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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.⁵ But having a higher chance of developing a mental illness doesn't mean that you will develop one. 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.

They can give specialist advice and information to people who have relatives with certain health conditions.⁶

Your GP or psychiatrist may be able to refer you to a service that does genetic counselling.

If you are thinking about adopting a child who has a family history of mental illness, you might want to speak to a genetics counsellor too.

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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 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. If you have a limited diet, or eat a lot of unhealthy food, it can make your mental health worse.⁷

Eating healthily can make you less likely to become unwell, and it can help you stay at a healthy body weight.⁸ Some mental illnesses can get worse if you don't have certain nutrients in your diet. For example, a low level of vitamin B is linked to depression.⁹

Getting regular exercise

Moderate exercise can help to improve your mood.¹⁰ It can also help you to feel better about yourself.¹¹

Getting enough sleep

Problems with sleep can affect how you feel physically and mentally.¹² In turn, how you feel physically and mentally can also affect how you sleep.¹³ If you regularly have problems sleeping, then you should talk to your GP.

Talking to someone about your problems

Talking to people about any problems you have can be useful. There are different ways that you can offload or chat to someone about how you're feeling. Some emotional support services offer telephone, email, or instant messaging chat. Some of these are listed in the '[Useful Contacts](#)' section of this factsheet.

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 use

Using alcohol¹⁴ or drugs¹⁵ 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 you use alcohol or drugs to deal with problems or stress, then you could try some of the options above instead.

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 get more information on healthy eating, exercise, and sleep in our 'Good health guide', which can be downloaded for free at www.rethink.org/resources.

You can find more information about:

- Stress – how to cope
- Drugs, alcohol and mental health
- Worried about your 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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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

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

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: info@sane.org.uk (admin only)

Website: www.sane.org.uk

CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably)

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

Telephone (national): 0800 58 58 58. **Telephone (London):** 0808 802 58 58.

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

Webchat: www.thecalmzone.net/help/webchat

Website: www.thecalmzone.net

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.

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

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

Website: www.themix.org.uk

¹ The Centre for Genetics Education, 2012. *Mental illness and inherited predisposition- schizophrenia and bipolar disorder*.

www.genetics.edu.au/genetics/Genetic-conditions-support-groups/FS58KBS.pdf [accessed 8th September 2017].

² As note 1.

³ National Center for Biotechnology Information. *Heritability estimates for psychotic disorders: the Maudsley twin psychosis series*.

www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10025441 [accessed 28th September 2017].

⁴ Hamilton, S. P. A New Lead from Genetic Studies in Depressed Siblings: Assessing Studies of Chromosome 3. *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 2011;168 (8): 783-789. Page 783.

⁵ Kendler, K. S., Karkowski, L. M., Prescott, C. A. Causal Relationship Between Stressful Life Events and the Onset of Major Depression. *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 1999;156 (6): 837-841.

⁶ NHS Health Careers. *Genomic counselling*.

www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/explore-roles/life-sciences/genomic-counselling [accessed 8th September 2017].

⁷ Royal College of Psychiatrists. *Eating well and mental health*.

www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/eatingwellandmentalthalth.aspx [accessed 8th September 2017].

⁸ As note 7.

⁹ NHS Choices. *Vitamin B12 or folate deficiency anaemia- Symptoms*.

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Anaemia-vitamin-B12-and-folate-deficiency/Pages/Symptoms.aspx [accessed 8th September 2017].

¹⁰ Thayer RE. *Calm Energy: How people regulate mood with food and exercise*. Oxford University Press. New York; 2001. Page 42.

¹¹ As note 10.

¹² NHS Choices. *Insomnia*.

www.nhs.uk/conditions/Insomnia/Pages/Introduction.aspx [accessed 12th September 2017].

¹³ As note 12.

¹⁴ Royal College of Psychiatrists. *Alcohol and Depression*.

www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/alcoholdepression.aspx [accessed 13th October 2017].

¹⁵ Royal College of Psychiatrists. *Mental Illness, Offending and Substance Misuse*.

www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/mentalillness,offending.aspx [accessed 28th September 2017].



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Last updated September 2017

Next update September 2020

Version 6



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www.rethink.org

Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0300 5000 927

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

Email advice@rethink.org

Did this help?

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
PO Box 17106
Birmingham B9 9LL

or call us on 0300 5000 927.

We're open 9:30am to 4pm
Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)



Leading the way to a better quality of life for everyone affected by severe mental illness.

For further information on Rethink Mental Illness
Phone 0121 522 7007
Email info@rethink.org

 [facebook.com/rethinkcharity](https://www.facebook.com/rethinkcharity)

 twitter.com/rethink_

 www.rethink.org

Need more help?

Go to www.rethink.org for information on symptoms, treatments, money and benefits and your rights.

Don't have access to the web?

Call us on 0121 522 7007. We are open Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm, and we will send you the information you need in the post.

Need to talk to an adviser?

If you need practical advice, call us on 0300 5000 927 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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