

Does mental illness run in families?

Sometimes there are a few people in a family who have a mental illness. But other times there is only one person. This information looks at whether mental illness runs in families. It is for people who are 18 or over and affected by mental illness in England.

Key Points.

- Some research suggests that mental illness can run in families.
- Researchers do not fully understand what causes mental illness to run in families.
- Mental illness may be passed on for different reasons, not just genes.
- Having a family member with a mental illness does not mean that you will have one too.
- You might be worried about mental illness running in your family. There are things you can do to look after your mental health.

This factsheet covers:

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

1. Does mental illness run in families?

Someone in your family may have a mental illness. If so, you might be worried about developing the same condition.

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

Most people with a mental illness do not have relatives with the same condition. 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 specific 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. Like, 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.

One of your parents might have bipolar disorder. If so, the chance of you not developing the condition is 90 out of 100. This means you are still unlikely to develop bipolar disorder.

Other research shows that other mental health conditions can run in the same family. Such as schizoaffective disorder, major depression, and anxiety.^{3,4,5}

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2. What causes mental illness to run in families?

Researchers do not fully understand what causes mental illness to be passed on in families.⁶

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

The chances of developing a mental illness could depend on you and your relatives' genes.

It does seem that mental illness, or some of them, could be hereditary. But researchers do not fully understand how this works. Mental illness may be passed on in family members for different reasons, not just genes.

What else might cause mental illness?

Environmental factors, like loneliness or a stressful life event, can help cause mental illness.⁷

Stressful things in life can include money problems, losing your job or the death of a loved one. If you have a family history of mental illness you have a higher chance of developing mental illness in these situations.

This does not 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.

You can find out more information on 'You can find out more information on **Stress – How to cope**' 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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3. What should I think about if I want to start a family?

You might have a mental illness and are thinking of starting a family. You could talk to a professional genetics counsellor about this.

Genetic counsellors work directly with patients and families. They can give specialist advice and information. They give it to people who have relatives with certain health conditions.⁸

If you want to speak to a genetics counsellor, you will need to be referred by a doctor. So, you can speak to your GP or psychiatrist.⁹

You can find out more information on '**New parents, pregnancy and mental health**' at www.rethink.org.

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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 does not 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.

Mindfulness

The practice of mindfulness makes us become more aware of the present moment. It can help us enjoy the world around us more and understand ourselves better.¹⁰

Mindfulness can help improve mental wellbeing.¹¹ It can also help you to notice signs of stress or anxiety. And deal with them better.

You can find out more at this link:

www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started

Having a healthy diet¹²

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

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

You can read more at: www.nhs.uk/live-well/eat-well

Getting regular exercise

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

You can find more information about '**Physical activity and mental health**' at www.rethink.org.

Getting enough sleep

Problems with sleep can affect how you feel physically and mentally. In turn, how you feel physically and mentally can also affect how you sleep. If you regularly have problems sleeping, then you should talk to your GP.¹⁴

You can find more information about '**How can I improve my sleep**' at www.rethink.org.

Drug and alcohol use

It can help to have a healthy relationship with alcohol. These tips might help: <https://healthieryou.org.uk/how-to-have-a-healthy-relationship-with-alcohol>

Drugs and alcohol can make the symptoms of your mental illness worse. And Some people use them to try and deal with their symptoms of their mental illness.

Speak to your GP if you are worried about your drug or alcohol use.

You can find more information about '**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.

Avoiding smoking or cutting down

It can help to avoid smoking or cut down.

You can find more information about '**Smoking and mental health**' at www.rethink.org.

Connecting with others

Good relationships with other people are important for mental wellbeing. Connecting with others can help build a sense of belonging and self-worth. It can also help you to chat about how you are feeling and give emotional support.¹⁵

You may not want to speak to a friend or family member about how you are feeling. If not, you could contact an emotional support line. Emotional support lines are listening services.

We have listed some emotional support lines in the '[Useful Contacts](#)' section of this factsheet.

You can find out more information on 'You can find out more information on '**Social inclusion and mental illness - How can I become more connected?**' 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.

Learn a new skill

Learning a new skill can have a positive impact on mental wellbeing. It can help boost self-confidence and help you connect with others. It can also 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. Like trying a new hobby such as painting or learn how to do something practical like changing a car tyre.¹⁶

Dealing with stress

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.

You can find more information about:

- Worried about your mental health?
- Stress – How to cope

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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Sane Line

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

Phone: 0300 304 7000.

Support forum: [www.sane.org.uk/what we do/support/supportforum](http://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.

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

Address: Freepost SAMARITANS LETTERS

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Website: www.samaritans.org

CALM (Campaign Against Living Miserably)

Provides emotional support for anyone who needs it. Leading a movement against suicide, the single biggest killer of men under 45 in the UK.

Phone: 0800 58 58 58.

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.

Phone: 0800 470 80 90.

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.

Phone: 0808 808 4994.

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

Webchat: www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-advisors

Crisis messenger: text THEMIX to 85258

Website: www.themix.org.uk

SupportLine

Confidential emotional support for children, young adults and adults.

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

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

Email: info@supportline.org.uk

Website: www.supportline.org.uk

Broken links?

All links to other pages on our website, and other websites, worked when we last reviewed this page. If you notice that any links no longer work, you can help us by emailing us at feedback@rethink.org and we will fix them. Many thanks.

Incorrect information?

All the information in this factsheet was correct, to the best of our knowledge, when we published it. If you think any information is incorrect you can help us by emailing us at feedback@rethink.org. Many thanks.

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¹ The Centre for Genetics Education, 2016. *Mental illness and inherited predisposition-schizophrenia and bipolar disorder*. Page 3.

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- www.genetics.edu.au/PDF/Mental_illness_fact_sheet-CGE.pdf (accessed 16th April 2024).
- ² The Centre for Genetics Education, 2016. *Mental illness and inherited predisposition - schizophrenia and bipolar disorder*. Page 1.
https://www.genetics.edu.au/PDF/Mental_illness_fact_sheet-CGE.pdf & see here <https://www.genetics.edu.au/SitePages/Mental-illness.aspx> (accessed 16th April 2024).
- ³ National Center for Biotechnology Information. *Heritability estimates for psychotic disorders: the Maudsley twin psychosis series*. Results.
www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/10025441 (accessed 19th March 2024).
- 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. pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21813496/ (accessed 19th March 2024)
- ⁵ Telman, L. G. E., van Steensel, F. J. A., Maric, M., Bögels, S. M. What are the odds of anxiety disorders running in families? A family study of anxiety disorders in mothers, fathers and siblings of children with anxiety disorders. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 2018; 27: 615-624. Page 615.
pure.uva.nl/ws/files/25579450/What_are_the_odds_of_anxiety_disorders_running_in_families.pdf (accessed 19th March 2024).
- ⁶ Mind. *Mental health problems – an introduction*. See ‘Do mental health problems run in families?’ <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/mental-health-problems-introduction/causes> (accessed 29 May 2024)
- ⁷ 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.
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- ⁸ NHS Health Careers. *Genomic counselling*. Para 1 www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/explore-roles/life-sciences/genomic-counselling (accessed 19th March 2024).
- ⁹ NHS. *Genetic and genomic testing. Who can have a genetic test on the NHS?* www.nhs.uk/conditions/genetic-and-genomic-testing/ (accessed 19th March 2024).
- ¹⁰ NHS. *Mindfulness*. See ‘How mindfulness helps mental wellbeing’ <https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/tips-and-support/mindfulness/> (accessed 29 May 2024)
- ¹¹ NHS. *5 ways to wellbeing*. Section 5. www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing/ (accessed 19th March 2024).
- ¹² Mental Health Foundation. *Diet and mental health*. www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/a-z-topics/diet-and-mental-health (accessed 16th April 2024).
- ¹³ Help Guide. *The mental health benefits of exercise. What are the mental health benefits of exercise?* www.helpguide.org/articles/healthy-living/the-mental-health-benefits-of-exercise.htm (accessed 19th March 2024).
- ¹⁴ The Sleep Charity. 2021. *Mental health*. thesleepcharity.org.uk/information-support/adults/mental-health/ (accessed 24th May 2024).
- ¹⁵ NHS. *5 ways to wellbeing*. Section 1 www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing/ (accessed 19th March 2024).
- ¹⁶ NHS. *5 ways to wellbeing*. Section 3 www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/improve-mental-wellbeing/ (accessed 19th March 2024).

This factsheet is available in large print.

Rethink Mental Illness Advice Service

Phone 0808 801 0525
Monday to Friday, 9:30am to 4pm
(excluding bank holidays)

Email



Patient Information Forum

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 18252
Solihull
B91 9BA

or call us on 0808 801 0525

We're open 9:30am to 4pm

Monday to Friday (excluding bank holidays)



Equality, rights, fair treatment, and the maximum quality of life for all those severely affected by mental illness.

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



rethink.org

Need more help?

Go to 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: 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.

Can you help us to keep going?

We can only help people because of donations from people like you. If you can donate please go to rethink.org/donate or call 0121 522 7007 to make a gift. We are very grateful for all our donors' generous support.



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