

Mental illness

Mental illness is common. The most common serious mental illnesses are:

- Schizophrenia – in which the affected person may have hallucinations, delusions and disorganised thoughts, and withdraw from society.
- Depression – in which the person feels very down and may lose all appetite, energy and enjoyment of life.
- Bipolar disorder – in which depressed moods alternate with feelings of power, energy and elation.

The risk of developing such an illness is higher if somebody else in the family has the condition. The risk is much higher if both parents are affected. It is clear that genetics are involved.

But the genetic element in these conditions is not thoroughly understood. There seems to be no single genetic alteration associated with most forms of mental illness. There is no easy explanation for what causes these illnesses. And there is no single genetic test that can help diagnose them or provide advice on what such illnesses mean to the rest of the family.

If you have mental illness, or have mental illness in the family, it is worth talking to your doctor about the likelihood of other family members developing it.

Contacts and further information

- All states and the ACT have familial cancer services. Contact them through your local state or territory health department.
- Mental Health Council of Australia at <http://www.mhca.org.au>
- beyondblue at <http://www.beyondblue.org.au>
- Sane Australia at <http://www.sane.org>
- National Organization for Rare Disorders at <http://www.rarediseases.org>
- Better Health Channel at <http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au>
- Australasian Genetic Alliance at <http://www.australasiangeneticalliance.org.au>
- MyDr at <http://www.mydr.com.au>
- The Centre for Genetics Education at <http://www.genetics.edu.au>
- HealthInsite at <http://www.healthinsite.com>
- MedicineNet at <http://www.medicinenet.com>
- For other related fact sheets, you can contact the Gene Technology Information Service on **free call Australia-wide 1800 631 276** or email gtis-australia@unimelb.edu.au or visit Biotechnology Australia's website at <http://www.biotechnology.gov.au>