



Family History of Mental Illness

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Mental illness is a category of diseases/disorders known to cause mild to severe disturbances in thought and/or behavior, which can result in an inability to cope with the ordinary demands and routines of life. There are more than 200 classified forms of mental illness. Common disorders are depression, bipolar disorder, dementia, schizophrenia and anxiety disorders. Symptoms may include changes in mood, personality, personal habits and/or social withdrawal. With treatment, many individuals learn to cope or recover from a mental illness or emotional disorder.

Mental disorders are common in the United States and around the world. An estimated 57.5 million Americans 18 years of age and older – approximately one in four adults – are diagnosed with a mental disorder in a given year. In addition, mental disorders are the leading cause of disability in the U.S. and Canada for ages 15-44 years. Many people suffer from more than one mental disorder. Approximately 45% of those with a mental disorder meet the criteria for 2 or more disorders.

Mental illnesses are multifactorial illnesses (caused by the interaction of various genetic and environmental factors). Causes may include a reaction to environmental stresses, genetic factors, biochemical imbalances, or a combination of these. Because genetic factors are involved, when one family member is affected, other close relatives may be at increased risk. At this time, no genetic tests are available for mental illness, and therefore prenatal diagnosis is not possible.

Mood disorders

Mood disorders include major depressive disorder, dysthymia (a milder, but longer-lasting form of depression), and bipolar disorder. Approximately 20.9 million American adults (9.5% of the U.S. adult population) have a mood disorder. The median age of onset for mood disorders is 30 years.

- **Depression:** Major depressive disorder is the leading cause of disability in the U.S. for ages 15-44. While major depressive disorder can occur at any age, the median age of onset is 32 years. Major depressive disorder is more prevalent in women than in men. Recurrence risks for first-degree relatives (children, parents, siblings) are approximately 10% for individuals with depression (2-4 times the general population risk); however, this risk could be higher depending on the family history, number of affected family members and age of onset. Relatives of individuals diagnosed with depression earlier in life are at a greater risk to develop depression than relatives of individuals diagnosed later in life.
- **Bipolar disorder:** More than 2 million American adults, or about 1 percent of the population age 18 and older in any given year, have bipolar disorder. Bipolar disorder is also known as manic depression. The illness causes a person's mood to swing from excessively "high" (mania) to irritable, sad and/or hopeless (depression), with periods of a normal mood in between. The median age of onset for bipolar disorder is 25 years. For information regarding recurrence risks, please refer to the table on page two.

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a disorder in which a person may have difficulty distinguishing between what is real and what is imaginary; may be unresponsive or withdrawn; and may have difficulty expressing normal emotions in social situations. Schizophrenia is not split personality or multiple personality. Most people with schizophrenia are not violent and do not pose a danger to others. Schizophrenia is not caused by childhood experiences, poor parenting or lack of willpower, nor are the symptoms identical for each person. Schizophrenia often appears in men in their late teens or early 20's, while women are generally affected in their 20's or early 30's. Schizophrenia affects men and women with equal frequency. There is a slight increase in the risk of schizophrenia in the siblings of patients with other types of psychosis. For information regarding recurrence risks, please refer to the table on page two.

Anxiety disorders

Anxiety disorders include panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, and phobias (social phobia, agoraphobia, and specific phobias). Approximately 40 million Americans have an anxiety disorder. Most people with an anxiety disorder also have another mood disorder. Nearly three-quarters of those with an anxiety disorder will have their first episode by 21.5 years of age.

RECURRENCE RISKS

Affected Relative	Bipolar Disorder	Schizophrenia
General population risk	2-3%	1%
Sibling	13%	9%
Parent	15%	13%
Sib & one parent	20%	15%
Both parents	50%	45%
Second-degree relative (aunt, uncle, grandparent)	5%	3%
Monozygotic twin	70%	40%
Dizygotic twin	20%	10%
First cousin	2-3%	1-2%

Table from Harper's Practical Genetic Counseling, 6th ed., 2004

Resources

Further information regarding these and other forms of mental illness is available through the following organizations:

National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov
800-421-4211

National Mental Health Association
www.nmha.org
800-969-6642