

Depression prevention better than cure

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Eight out of ten Australians would radically change their risky behaviour if tests showed they had a genetic susceptibility to depression, a national study has found.

The study, conducted by researchers at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and published online in the *Journal of Affective Disorders*, is the first population-wide analysis of Australian attitudes towards [genetic testing](#) for risk of mental illness.

There was overwhelming support for the use of genetic tests to help people take steps to prevent depression before it occurs, especially among those who believe they or their children have a higher than average risk, a randomised phone survey of 1,046 adults found.

The preventive strategies that received support included helping children to be resilient to stress (92%), modifying their own stress (84%), starting therapies (80%) and reducing excessive drug and alcohol use (74%).

The widespread interest in prevention strategies was based on the understanding that while there may be a [genetic predisposition](#) to mental illness, environmental factors also played a major role.

The findings suggest there would be widespread community support for [genetic screening](#) as a valuable clinical tool for early intervention in high-risk groups.

“There is no certainty depression will manifest in someone with a higher-

than-average genetic risk whether they are exposed to stressful life events or not,” said study lead-author Dr Alex Wilde, from UNSW’s School of Psychiatry.

“Yet most people were still overwhelmingly prepared to attempt to reduce the possibility of developing a depressive illness by modifying risky behaviours,” Dr Wilde said.

Dr Wilde said people could try to change unhealthy aspects of their lives even without a genetic test, but the findings suggest that having test results at hand may act as a powerful motivator for change.

In general, Australians are very interested in knowing their [genetic susceptibility](#) to mental illness.

A linked study by the same research team, published this month in the UK-based journal Psychological Medicine, showed there was significant interest in genetic testing for depression, despite ongoing concerns about the tests’ validity and that the results could potentially increase social stigma and discrimination.

“The scientific validity is not yet clear for most of the direct-to-consumer genetic tests currently marketed online, including tests for some mental illnesses, which could expose early users to discrimination, stigma and potentially misleading health risks,” Dr Wilde said.

This was reflected in the survey result, with those questioned far more likely to support genetic tests carried out by their doctor (63%) than those undertaken through internet-based direct-to-consumer services (40%), Dr Wilde said.

Other study authors were Professor Philip Mitchell and Dusan Hadzi-Pavlovic from UNSW’s School of Psychiatry, Associate Professor

Bettina Meiser, from the Prince of Wales Clinical School, and Professor Peter Schofield, from Neuroscience Research Australia.

Provided by University of New South Wales

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