



“A good laugh and a long sleep are the best cures in the doctor’s book.”  
- Irish Proverb

Dear Member

This month’s newsletter provides yet another opportunity for the POLMED YOUR CARE team to assist you with improving your health.

We know that living with a chronic illness presents many challenges. The manner in which you may be affected depends on your particular illness and how it affects your body, how severe it is, and the treatments that might be involved. It takes time to adjust to the realities of a long-term illness, but you have to be willing to learn more about your condition, seek support from others, and actively participate in taking care of your body.

Our topics this month:

- We take a closer look at the health risks associated with **sugary soft drinks**, not only for **diabetics** but anyone who may be overweight.
- We shed some light on the causes and treatment of **asthma**.
- We tackle the sensitive issue of **bipolar disorder** – recognising the signs and how to seek treatment.
- Lastly, we examine the causes of **back pain** and identify the people who are most at risk.

Enjoy the read!

POLMED YOUR CARE Support Team



## Why soft drinks are health pitfalls

Soft drinks are a major cause of the alarming increase in obesity and diabetes in South Africa. When it comes to sugary drinks, how much is too much?

[Read more ...](#)



## Getting to grips with bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder affects over four million South Africans. But if it is well managed, people living with this condition can lead a full and productive life.

[Read more ...](#)



## Could I have asthma?

It could be just a wheeze, or a harmless night cough. Or perhaps you’re displaying the classic symptoms of asthma.

[Read more ...](#)



## What you need to know about back pain

Back pain is a common medical complaint. Take care of your back by knowing how to prevent back problems and being aware of the risk factors.

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## Why soft drinks are health pitfalls

A study by the Wits Rural Public Health and Health Transitions Research Unit found that by 2017, there will be more than nine million obese adults in South Africa, and that more than one quarter of these nine million people will be obese because of soft drinks.

Besides obesity, soft drinks are related to other lifestyle diseases. These include stroke, blindness and kidney failure.

### Why are sugary drinks so hazardous?

The World Health Organization recommends a daily sugar intake of just six teaspoons. Consider then that one 500 ml can of soft drink contains almost 17 teaspoons of sugar.

The dangers of excessive sugar in the diet extend far beyond cavities. A growing body of research shows that sugar triggers various health complications. "Sodas and other sugary drinks are a major cause of the alarming increase in both obesity and diabetes in the last 20 years," says Barry Popkin, a professor at the University of North Carolina in America.

According to the Harvard School of Public Health, people who consume these beverages regularly (one to two cans or more) have a 26% greater risk of developing Type 2 diabetes than people who rarely have such drinks.

They also found that men who average a can a day were more prone to a heart attack. A related study in women found a similar sugary beverage–heart disease link. It's also worth noting that children are also at risk for sugar-related illnesses. According to the above study, a child's risk for obesity increases an average of 60% with every additional serving consumed per day of sugar-sweetened beverages, including sugary soda.

Children are also at risk for **sugar-related illnesses**

Furthermore, people who drink two or more soft drinks a week have an 87% higher risk of developing pancreatic cancer compared to those who drank fewer, according to a study analysing data from the Singapore Chinese Health Study.

In fact, of everything you could drink, says the US Beverage Guidance Panel, their "least recommended" are drinks that are sweetened with sugar, high-fructose corn syrup and other high-calorie sweeteners. "They get the thumbs down as a daily beverage because they provide so many calories and virtually no other nutrients. Routinely drinking these beverages can lead to weight gain and increase the risk of Type 2 diabetes."

### How much is too much?

Ideally, for your continued good health, you should be drinking absolutely no soft drinks that have been sweetened with sugar or high-fructose corn syrup. This is the recommendation from the Harvard School of Public Health. Realistically, if you can't go without your sugar fix, one cup is the maximum recommended daily limit.



### Drink safe

- Drink beverage blends made with 100% fruit juice and sparkling water.
- Try spritzers that contain nothing more than sparkling water and natural flavours.
- Research continues to prove that soft drinks are bad for your health, but you can never go wrong with water.

### Good to know

Sugary beverages are not just cooldrinks. They also include flavoured water, energy drinks and sweetened fruit juices.

#### References:

<http://www.health24.com/Diet-and-nutrition/Beverages/why-south-africans-need-to-can-soft-drinks-20151124>

<http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=10012163>

<http://www.cpc.unc.edu/projects/nutrans/policy/beverage/us-beverage-panel>



## Could I have asthma?

**Just a wheeze? A harmless night-cough? Exercise is supposed to be this hard, right?**

Maybe, or perhaps you're displaying the classic symptoms of asthma, which you're ignoring, thereby putting your life at risk.

South Africa has the fourth-most annual asthma-related deaths in the world, with the majority being people between 5 and 35 years old. Worse, this number is on the rise.

### What is asthma?

Asthma is actually a form of bronchitis, which means it occurs when the lower airways of the lungs become inflamed – this can then inhibit their ability to transport respiratory gasses. Asthma is largely caused by one's genetics and is often caused by irritants in the air around you, such as pollen, pet dander and pollution.

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### What causes asthma?

The underlying cause of asthma is generally agreed as being genetic, with the IgE gene being suspected as the location of the issue. This means that if someone in your family is asthmatic, there is a much higher chance of you having the condition too.



**As for what causes asthma to flare up, the specific irritants or allergens can vary from person to person, but the most common are:**

- Pollen
- Food and certain additives
- Dust and dust mites
- Mould
- Feathers, either from animals or in down pillows and duvets
- Animal hair or saliva
- Cigarette smoke or traffic fumes
- Aerosol sprays, solvents and other chemicals

### How is asthma treated?

Asthma treatment has two main elements: environmental prevention and medication. Environmental prevention involves taking measures to minimise the chance of coming into contact with the irritants that could cause your asthma to flare up or develop into a full-blown attack. This could include sitting in the non-smoking areas of restaurants or more regularly changing your bed linen, for example.

Medication is the main part of asthma treatment (given how difficult it can be to avoid pollen, for instance). The exact medication and dosage will vary according to the specifics of your condition, and it's very important to follow the treatment instructions given to you by your doctor.

**It is always best to consult your general practitioner (GP) if you suspect that you or a loved one is suffering from asthma.**



## Getting to grips with bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder (previously known as manic depression), is a mood disorder characterised by severe mood swings, along with shifts in energy levels and the ability to function.

There are various types of bipolar disorder; classified by how often one experiences the severe ups and downs typical of this mental illness.

Manic episodes often lead to reckless behaviour, as the person's ability to make judgements is affected. Excessive spending, reckless driving, abuse of drugs and alcohol, and sexual indiscretions are typical of someone experiencing a manic episode.

Other symptoms of this phase include a feeling of euphoria, extreme agitation, increased energy, little need for sleep, rapid talking, racing thoughts and extreme, unrealistic self-confidence.

Some people also experience psychotic symptoms during severe episodes of mania and depression. This is when you experience things that aren't real, e.g. hearing voices, or feeling that you have special powers.

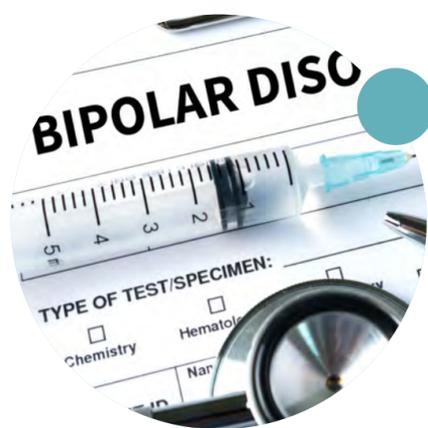
According to The South African Depression and Anxiety Group, over four million South Africans have bipolar disorder. Although men and women are equally at risk, men tend to have more manic episodes than women.



### Treatment

There's no cure for this condition. But when bipolar disorder is well managed – and you take your prescribed medication and go for psychotherapy – you can lead a full and productive life.

If someone is not diagnosed or treated, the condition can worsen over time. Stopping your medication by yourself is also not advisable as this may trigger another manic or depressive episode. If your condition has been well managed on treatment for about a year, your doctor may consider stopping treatment. This is done under strict supervision.



### Recognise the signs

The signs of any mental illness can vary depending on the specific illness. In general, symptoms of bipolar disorder include:

- Feeling sad, depressed and gloomy all the time.
- Major changes in eating habits, either not hungry for long periods or eating in excess.
- Inability to concentrate, feelings of indifference and a lack of motivation.
- Constant stress and anxiety over work, finances, life, friends and family.
- Emotionally distant from friends and family.
- Trouble sleeping, changes in sex drive, excessive anger, hostility or violence.
- Drug or alcohol abuse.

### Help yourself

Learn as much as you can about your illness. The more you know, the better your chances of overcoming the disorder.

1. Keep your expectations realistic, for the sake of your own well-being. Your general practitioner (GP) is a good place to start to help get access to care and support. Speak to your doctor regularly and assess which treatments or options are worth your time and money.
2. Don't blame yourself for your illness. Come to terms with the fact that you have not caused it, and you cannot "fix" it. All you can do is accept it and manage it.
3. Take care of yourself. Always put your needs first.
4. Join a support group. This can offer you a place to share your experiences and learn from others going through the same thing as you.

All you can do is **accept it and manage it**

*(Disclaimer: The purpose of this article is to provide general background information and not to substitute any medical diagnosis or advice received from a qualified healthcare professional.)*



## Back pain - causes and risk factors

Statistics show that four out of five people will experience at least one bout of back pain during their lifetime. Taking care of your back should be about preventing back problems in the first place, and being aware of risk factors.

This article looks at the main causes of back pain and the people who are most at risk.

### The basics

In 85% of cases the exact cause of back pain can't be determined. However, only 2% of patients with back pain will need surgery.

Back pain can be experienced anywhere along the spine. Most people complain of pain in the lower back, or lumbar area. This is because the lower back bears the weight of the upper body, as well as any additional weight you might be carrying.



The pain experienced can be acute, recurrent or chronic. Acute pain starts suddenly and intensely, but doesn't last very long. In most cases it will resolve on its own in a few days, as it most probably isn't caused by a serious underlying medical condition.

However, recurrence is common. It's therefore important to try to identify possible reasons for experiencing back pain and to treat it accordingly.

Chronic pain persists longer than three months and even slight movements can cause it to flare up. Specialist advice is often required for chronic back pain.



### Common causes

Backache can be caused by various factors, including an accident or injury, poor posture, degenerative conditions, metabolic diseases, infections and even gynaecological problems.

However, the main causes are:

- **Sprains, strains and minor injuries.** Lifting a heavy object or making any sudden movements could cause a strain or sprain of the muscles, tendons or ligaments in your back. As a result, it can cause back muscles to go into a spasm, causing back pain. These types of injuries usually occur due to underlying causes such as inactivity and improper movements of the spine. Poor posture is usually at the root of most back injuries.
- **Intervertebral disc lesions.** In between separate vertebrae is a gel-like disc that acts as a shock absorber. With a disc lesion, one of these discs would bulge, tear or rupture, pressing against sensitive nerves from the spinal cord.
- **Facet joint problems and osteoarthritis.** Movements of the spine are made possible by small facet joints between the vertebrae. These joints could degenerate due to wear and tear, also known as osteoarthritis, causing back pain.
- **Other causes.** This could include car accidents, developmental problems or tumours.

### Who is at risk?

A sedentary lifestyle due to ageing or work responsibilities is one of the biggest risk factors for back pain.

Other risk factors that need to be taken into account include: pregnancy, smoking, improper body mechanics while doing sports, genetic factors such as spinal abnormalities, and psychological factors such as depression.

A sedentary lifestyle is one of the **biggest risk factors**