



POLMED®

OUR INVESTMENT | OUR HEALTH | OUR FUTURE



**DISEASE
INFORMATION
BOOKLET**

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INTRODUCTION

POLMED offers specific disease management programmes to assist our members with managing their chronic conditions.

As a valued POLMED member, your health is important to us. We've therefore put together this handy booklet with information on the chronic conditions that are managed by our Disease Risk Management (DRM) and Mental Health programmes.

Be sure to keep this booklet in a safe place – it contains practical information on how to live with these conditions should you or your dependants be identified for enrolment on these programmes.

REMEMBER: By managing your chronic conditions, you can improve your long-term health!

NOTE: The information in this booklet is made available with the courtesy of Medscheme Holdings (Pty) Ltd, in partnership with Health24.



ABOUT ASTHMA

Asthma causes chronic (ongoing) inflammation of your air passages. The result is that the airways that carry oxygen to your lungs are prone to becoming narrowed. When this happens, you have an “asthma attack”, usually with wheezing, shortness of breath, coughing and tightness in the chest (although the symptoms can differ from person to person). In other words, an asthma attack makes it hard to breathe.

In some people, asthma is very mild, with occasional attacks that aren't serious; in others, it can interfere significantly with daily activities, with attacks that may lead to hospitalisation. Whether you've been living with asthma for a long time or were recently diagnosed, being aware of the triggers and knowing the early warning signs of an attack could help you prevent a life-threatening emergency.

Viral infections like colds are one of the most common triggers for an asthma attack. Avoid close contact with people who have a cold or the flu. Increasing your preventer medication if you get a cold or flu may prevent an attack. Chat to your doctor about this.

EARLY WARNING SIGNS

Unfortunately, you can't always avoid asthma triggers, so it's important to know the early warning signs of an attack:

- Fatigue or tiredness
- Reliever isn't helping or its effect wears off in less than 4 hours
- Trouble sleeping
- Troublesome cough that disturbs sleep
- Shortness of breath or wheezing that interferes with you being able to do your usual activities
- Breathing faster than normal

COMMON TRIGGERS TO AVOID

Your asthma triggers can be quite different to those of another person. It's therefore important to know your own triggers and learn how to avoid them. Asthma triggers can include one or more of the following:

Tobacco smoke

This is a common and powerful trigger. Don't smoke, and avoid second-hand smoke as far as possible.

Outdoor air pollution

If at all possible, try to avoid traffic jams, parking garages and dusty workplaces.

Cockroaches

Avoid cockroaches by keeping your home clean and sanitised.

Dust mites

Clean your house regularly, and use mattress and pillow covers to create a barrier between dust mites and yourself, and keep your linen clean. Also choose blinds over curtains, and tiles over carpets. Wash bedding, if possible at 60 degrees Celsius, and place non-washable bedding in a plastic bag in your freezer overnight.

Furry pets

Don't keep furry pets, but if you must, wash them every week and keep them outside as much as possible.



Exercise, certain medication, weather conditions such as thunderstorms or high humidity, breathing in cold, dry air, and some foods, food additives and fragrances can also **trigger** asthma attacks.



TREATING ASTHMA

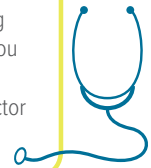
... the bad news

There isn't a cure for asthma, but there are many steps you can follow to lead a symptom-free life. The most important step is to collaborate with your doctor to track your symptoms and adjust your treatment accordingly.



Important!

Use your preventer medication every day (even if you're not experiencing symptoms). Preventer medication relieves the inflammation and makes you less prone to getting an asthma attack. Use your reliever when you have symptoms of an attack and as prescribed. Don't be afraid to ask your doctor to demonstrate how to use your inhaler or nebuliser.



MORE TIPS

Did you know that many people with asthma **don't use their pump effectively?** The result is that very little of the medication gets into their lungs where it needs to work. Ask your doctor to check the **way you're using your pump**, especially if you see **wisps of vapour escaping** from the pump when you inhale.



Stay active

Try to do a little bit of exercise every day – this will strengthen your heart and lungs. Ask your doctor about the best way to stay active.



Drop a jeans size

Being overweight can worsen asthma symptoms. A dietician can help you lose weight.



Stick to the plan

Follow your written asthma action plan step by step. This will help you to control your asthma over the long term, and will outline the steps to deal with an attack.



Be informed

Make a point to learn more about the different types of treatment.



ABOUT BACK PAIN

Back pain is the most common cause of pain; 4 in 5 adults experience back pain at least once in their lives. It's mostly caused by minor injuries, "slipped" discs, or problems with the bones of the spine.

Your spine: both strong and vulnerable

The back's system of bones (vertebrae), the protective discs between them, the muscles, ligaments, tendons and nerves, work together to bear the weight of your body and the loads you carry. The back provides great strength and flexibility, but because the spine is so central to the body's movements, even small amounts of damage can often cause pain. Back pain can occur anywhere along the spine, but the most common site is the lower, or lumbar back, which bears the weight of the upper body. Your lumbar spine also twists and bends more than the upper back, making it more vulnerable to injury.

When to see your doctor

Contact your doctor if:

- The back pain is caused by a **fall or blow** to the back.
- You have previously had a **cancer diagnosis**.
- You experienced **unexplained weight loss** of more than 10kg within 6 months.
- You have used **long-term corticosteroids**.
- You have had a recent **infection** or have a **fever**.
- You have had a **recent serious illness**.
- You experience **night pain** or pain at rest.
- You are an **intravenous (IV) drug user**.
- This is a new problem and you're **over 50 years or under 16 years** of age.
- There are other symptoms, such as **bladder or bowel problems, abdominal pain or pain, numbness, or "pins and needles"** down your legs or around your bottom.
- The pain **doesn't improve** after 4 - 6 weeks.

Risk factors that can't be changed:

- **Ageing.** With age the spinal discs – which act as cushions between each of the spinal vertebrae – gradually lose moisture and shrink, putting more stress on the joints.
- **Genetics.** Some people are more susceptible to back pain if they have inherited spinal abnormalities, or a greater tendency for disc problems.
- **Pregnancy** makes women prone to back pain.



Risk factors that can be changed:

- **Sedentary lifestyle.** Being fit helps keep back and stomach muscles strong and your spine supported and flexible, making it less prone to injuries.
- **Obesity.** Increased weight puts pressure on vertebrae and discs. A large belly pulls the spine forward and out of alignment.
- **Poor posture** and spending long periods in one position, e.g. at a computer or slouching in front of a television.
- **Risky work activities,** e.g. lifting, forceful movements, bending and twisting into awkward positions, repetitive movements and vibration (as with long-distance driving).
- **Poor body mechanics** during sport, e.g. a jerky golf swing or incorrect use of exercise equipment.
- **Smoking**
- **Depression** may have a negative influence on your perception of pain and ability to cope with back problems.



Sitting

- Use good lower back support. Keep your knees and hips level, at right angles to your back, feet flat on the floor.
- Take breaks every 30 minutes from sitting or any one position. Get up, stretch, take a short walk.



Driving

- Sit as far back as possible; ensure rear-view mirrors are correctly adjusted.
- When you get into your car, sit down with your legs outside; then lift your feet and swivel your body inside. Use the hand closest to the safety belt to help pull it across yourself so you don't twist your back unnecessarily.



Standing

- Avoid rounding your back, hunching your shoulders and tensing your neck.
- Wear comfortable, low-heeled shoes (high heels put pressure on your lower back). Keep your shoulders back, your head up and stomach in.



Lifting

- When lifting a load, hold it close to your body, let your legs take most of the strain, and avoid lifting and twisting at the same time. Keep your back straight, bend your knees to lower yourself. Keep your weight on your feet as you stand up, and keep your back straight.
- Avoid raising your arms above shoulder height when you're reaching for something, especially a heavy item.
- When pushing or pulling a load, use your leg muscles rather than your back muscles. Stand with a straight back, knees bent and one foot in front of the other.

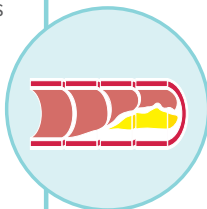


ABOUT CHOLESTEROL

Cholesterol is a soft, waxy substance – one of the blood fats made naturally in the body. It helps to form cells, hormones and bile (that helps us digest food). Cholesterol is found mostly in animal products such as meat, cream and butter.

WHAT IS “HIGH” CHOLESTEROL?

This is when you have too much “bad” cholesterol in your blood. This, in turn, can cause narrowing and blockages of the arteries – the blood vessels that carry blood to your heart muscle and to other parts of your body. In time, the narrowing of the arteries to your heart can lead to a heart attack, while blockages in the arteries of your brain can cause a stroke.



HOW CAN YOU TELL YOU HAVE HIGH CHOLESTEROL?

High cholesterol doesn't usually make you feel sick and many people don't know they have it. The first time they realise they have high cholesterol may be when they have a heart attack or stroke. If a family member is diagnosed with high cholesterol, you should get yours checked too. The only way to know for sure is to have your cholesterol checked by means of a simple blood test at your doctor, clinic or pharmacy.

Risk factors

HIGH CHOLESTEROL CAN BE CAUSED BY:

- **Your genes.** Having a family member who has heart disease or high cholesterol increases your risk.
- **Gender.** Men are at higher risk, but a woman's risk increases after menopause.
- **Age.** The older you are - the greater your risk.
- **Being overweight.** This increases your risk of high blood fat, including high cholesterol.
- **Low activity levels.** Exercise helps to lower your cholesterol levels, and helps to keep your weight in check.
- **An unhealthy diet.** Eating too much fat, fried food, animal products high in cholesterol and processed foods such as white bread, cakes and sweets can lead to weight gain and raised cholesterol levels.
- **Diabetes.** High blood sugar tends to raise bad cholesterol and lower good cholesterol. High blood sugar also damages the lining of your arteries which, combined with high cholesterol levels, leads to an even greater risk of heart disease and stroke.



CHECK YOUR CHOLESTEROL

Every 5 years if you don't have any of the risk factors mentioned.
At least once a year if you have one or more of these factors.

WHAT SHOULD YOUR GOAL BE?

Less than 3 mmol per litre is the target low-density lipoprotein (**LDL**) cholesterol level for everyone. LDL is known as the “**bad**” form of cholesterol, linked to a build-up of cholesterol in the arteries.

DID YOU KNOW?

There's also a “**good**” form of cholesterol, called high-density lipoprotein (**HDL**) cholesterol, which helps to **clean up the blockages in the arteries**. With the right lifestyle changes, this type of cholesterol is boosted.

HDL

LDL



A HEART-HEALTHY DIET

Keep your cholesterol in check and reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke by eating:

- A variety of fresh food
- High-fibre starchy foods such as seed bread instead of white bread
- Healthy proteins such as chicken, fish, lean meat and eggs
- Low-fat dairy foods
- Dried beans, split peas, lentils and soya
- Five portions of different fruits and vegetables every day
- Less salt and salty foods such as stock cubes, soup powders, cured meat, sauces and potato crisps
- More vegetable oils such as olive and canola oil, and less hard fat, such as butter and margarine
- Less sugar, sugary foods and drinks



REMEMBER!

Drink ALCOHOL in moderation!

Too much alcohol will push up your blood pressure and cholesterol, and increase your risk of heart and liver disease. The guidelines are as follows:

Women: maximum of 1 drink per day

Men: maximum of 2 drinks per day



Source:
Heart & Stroke Foundation, SA

MORE TIPS ...

- **Stay active.** Try to do a little bit of exercise every day. The more you do the better, but any exercise at all is better than no exercise. Take the stairs instead of the lift!
- **Drop a jeans size.** Aim to lose 0.5–1kg per week if you're overweight. A dietician can help.
- **Kick the habit.** If you smoke, stop. Your cholesterol levels and blood pressure will improve almost instantly. After about a year, your risk of heart disease will have dropped by HALF.
- **Don't hesitate, meditate!** For your overall health, do whatever you need to do to keep your stress levels in check.
- **Pop that pill.** Take your cholesterol-lowering medication as prescribed.

? ABOUT TYPE 1 DIABETES

If you have type 1 diabetes, the specialised “beta” cells in your pancreas (a large gland that sits behind your stomach) can no longer produce insulin. This hormone helps to control the levels of sugar, or “glucose”, in your blood (especially after meals) by moving it to your cells for energy. Because diabetics lack insulin, they have higher-than-normal blood glucose levels.

IMPORTANT:

If you have type 1 diabetes, you will require insulin by means of regular injections or an insulin pump. In fact, you’ll need insulin for the rest of your life to control your blood glucose levels.

Signs and symptoms

- Excessive thirst
- Weight loss
- Excessive urination
- Tiredness

THE GOOD NEWS!

You can prevent health problems and control your symptoms with insulin therapy and lifestyle changes. You’ll feel better and have more energy!

! CONTROL AND TARGET

Another target to keep in mind:

Your doctor will mention your “glycosylated haemoglobin” (HbA1c) level. This reflects your average blood glucose control over the last three months. Most diabetics should aim for a value of less than 7, but it’s best to chat to your doctor about your specific target level.

HOW CAN YOU TELL IF YOUR BLOOD GLUCOSE IS UNDER CONTROL?

Before meals

Your blood glucose level should be between 4 and 6 mmol/l.

After meals

You’ll have a blood glucose level of less than 10 mmol/l.

Control your diabetes

• Step 1

Check your blood glucose levels and administer your insulin as prescribed, even if you are feeling unwell. Check your levels:

- More often if you feel unwell
- Before and after exercise
- More often if your insulin dose has been changed
- At mealtimes and bedtime

• Step 2

Stay active. Try to do a bit of exercise every day. The more you do the better. Aim for 30 minutes a day, 5 times a week.

• Step 3

Work closely with your doctor.

• Step 4

Follow a healthy diet. Keep your blood glucose levels in check and optimise health by eating:

- A variety of fresh food
- High-fibre starchy foods such as seed bread instead of white bread
- Healthy proteins such as chicken, fish, lean meat and eggs
- Low-fat dairy foods
- Dried beans, split peas, lentils and soya
- Five portions of different fruits and vegetables every day
- Less salt and salty foods such as stock cubes, soup powders, cured meat, sauces and potato crisps
- More vegetable oils such as olive and canola oil and less hard fat, such as butter and margarine
- Less sugar and sugary foods and drinks, and avoid fruit juice altogether

THE BAD NEWS

If you don’t take your medication as prescribed, and don’t control your blood glucose levels carefully through your diet and lifestyle, you risk diabetes-related health problems. These include:

- Loss of vision
- Damage to your kidneys
- Damage to your nerves (for example, numbness and a burning sensation in the hands, feet and legs)
- Foot ulcers, which are slow to heal and become infected
- Increased risk of other infections (for example, bladder infections)
- Heart disease and stroke

DID YOU KNOW?

It is not clear why certain people get type 1 diabetes, but the condition occurs when your own immune system attacks and destroys the insulin-producing beta cells in your pancreas.



REMEMBER!

Drink **ALCOHOL** in moderation!

Too much alcohol will push up your blood pressure and cholesterol, and increase your risk of heart and liver disease. The guidelines are as follows:

Women: maximum of 1 drink per day

Men: maximum of 2 drinks per day



Source:
Heart & Stroke Foundation, SA

? ABOUT TYPE 2 DIABETES

If you have type 2 diabetes, the specialised “beta” cells in your pancreas are able to make insulin. However, they either make too little or your body can’t use the insulin effectively. When there isn’t enough of this hormone in your body, or it’s not used as it should be, sugar (or “glucose”) can’t be moved to your other body cells to supply them with energy. This means that you have higher-than-normal blood glucose levels.

Signs and symptoms of type 2 diabetes (when it is not controlled)

The majority of South Africans who have diabetes have what’s called “type 2” diabetes. Many of these diabetics go undiagnosed for a long time as the symptoms and signs are sometimes difficult to spot. Look out for the following:

- Excessive thirst
- Blurred vision
- Excessive urination
- Itching and skin infections
- Tiredness
- Recurring bladder infections
- Constant hunger

Visit your doctor if you’re experiencing some or all of the above.



! ASSESS YOUR RISK

If you answer “yes” to some or all of these questions, you’re at increased risk:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are you overweight? | <input type="checkbox"/> Does your sister, brother, mother or father suffer from obesity or type 2 diabetes? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are you older than 35? | <input type="checkbox"/> Do you have high cholesterol? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are you exercising for less than 2½ hours per week? | <input type="checkbox"/> Do you have high blood pressure? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Are you apple-shaped, with a belly or waistline disproportionately enlarged, compared to your limbs, even if you’re not overweight? Belly fat is an indicator of the padding of abdominal fat around your organs. | <input type="checkbox"/> Have you ever suffered from diabetes during pregnancy? |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Are you of Indian descent? (Diabetes is very common among this group). |

Manage your diabetes

People at risk for type 2 diabetes can delay and even prevent this condition by following a healthy lifestyle. This same lifestyle will keep your diabetes in check if you’ve already been diagnosed. This involves:

- Regular **blood glucose checks** (ask your doctor how often this should be done)
- Maintaining a **healthy weight**
- Following a **healthy diet** (get a dietician to work out an eating plan for you)
- Managing your **blood pressure** and **cholesterol** levels (ask your doctor for advice)
- **Not smoking**
- **Staying active** (try to do a bit of exercise every day and aim for 30 minutes 5 times a week)



The good news!

There is no cure for diabetes, but it can be **managed successfully with a healthy lifestyle**, often with the addition of medication in the form of **insulin injections or tablets**. You’ll feel better and have more energy!

THE BAD NEWS

If you don’t control your blood sugar levels through lifestyle changes and medication, you risk diabetes-related health problems. These include :

- Loss of vision
- Damage to your kidneys
- Damage to your nerves (for example, numbness and a burning sensation in the hands, feet and legs)
- Foot ulcers, which are slow to heal and become infected
- Increased risk of other infections (for example, bladder infections)
- Sexual dysfunction (for example, impotence)
- Heart disease and stroke





ABOUT HEART FAILURE

Heart failure is when your heart can't pump enough blood and oxygen to your body's tissues and organs to meet their needs. Most cases of heart failure are linked to a heart which has been weakened by a previous heart attack. The most common cause of a heart attack is coronary artery disease (CAD). CAD is a build-up of fatty deposits – called atherosclerosis – in the heart (coronary) arteries, affecting the blood flow and oxygen supply to the heart muscle. Total blockage of a coronary artery can cause death of part of the heart muscle (heart attack), which makes the heart less able to pump efficiently. Other possible causes of heart failure include structural abnormalities of the heart, such as narrowed or leaking valves, or thickening of the muscle from long-standing high blood pressure.

Lower your risk

The best action you can take to help prevent heart failure is to prevent coronary artery disease, as well as high blood pressure, by following a healthy lifestyle:

- **Don't smoke.** If you do, quit. Smoking greatly increases heart disease risk.
- **Exercise regularly.** Apart from the benefits mentioned under 'Check your blood pressure', it will help control your weight and stress levels.
- **Check your cholesterol.** If your total cholesterol reading is over 5mmol/L, ask your doctor for advice. A healthy diet, exercise and quitting smoking will also help keep your cholesterol under control.
- **Check your blood sugar.** If you have diabetes, take your medication as directed. Diabetes will increase your risk of CAD and high blood pressure.
- **Check your blood pressure.** If you're younger than 60 years, your target blood pressure is 140/90mmHg, and if it's higher than this, you're at greater risk of heart disease. Exercising, limiting alcohol intake and a healthy diet all help to keep your blood pressure in the normal range. Remember – cutting back on your salt intake can help to drop your blood pressure, and if you already have heart failure, less salt in your food will mean less fluid build-up. Cut your intake of salt to less than 5g (one teaspoon) per day by eating less processed foods, by checking food labels (always go for the product with the lowest sodium content), and by adding less salt to food at the table and while cooking.



How do you know you're experiencing heart failure?

It isn't always obvious in the early stages, but common symptoms may include:

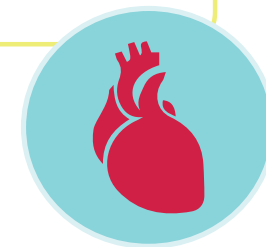
- **Shortness of breath** and/or **coughing** while lying down, relieved by sitting or standing up, and getting fresh air. You may have a rapid heartbeat, and the feeling of being suffocated.
- **Breathing difficulties** may occur during activities that didn't previously cause problems.
- **Fluid build-up**, especially in the legs. Your legs may get puffy, making it difficult to put on the shoes you usually wear.
- **Dizziness, fainting, fatigue or weakness.**
- **Rapid weight gain** (due to fluid build-up).
- More frequent **urination at night.**
- **Nausea, abdominal swelling and tenderness** from fluid build-up in the abdomen.



Consult your doctor without delay if you experience any symptoms of heart failure.

Can heart failure be treated?

Heart failure is usually a long-term condition managed with **lifelong treatment**, the goal of which is to prevent further damage to the heart and **improve its pumping ability**. This is usually achieved with **medication** and **lifestyle modification**, but surgical procedures may be considered in certain cases. Sometimes, heart failure can be reversed by treating the **underlying disease process** that led to heart failure, e.g. valve-replacement surgery in



? ABOUT HYPERTENSION

Hypertension is abnormally high blood pressure. Blood pressure is the pressure of blood in your arteries – the blood vessels that carry blood away from your heart. Hypertension is often known as the “silent killer”, since many people who have it, don’t know it. A family history of high blood pressure could mean you’re also at risk.

DID YOU KNOW?

Approximately four in 10 adults older than 25 years have hypertension, according to the South African Hypertension Society. If it’s not treated, hypertension can cause kidney failure, eye problems, heart disease and stroke.

REMEMBER!

Drink **ALCOHOL** in moderation!

Too much alcohol will push up your blood pressure and increase your risk of heart and liver disease. The guidelines are as follows:

Women: maximum of 1 drink per day

Men: maximum of 2 drinks per day



Source: Heart & Stroke Foundation, SA

KNOW YOUR NUMBERS

Your doctor or a nurse at a clinic or pharmacy can take your blood pressure. But what do the numbers mean?

- **Normal:** 120/80 to 129/84
- **Normal:** (but keep an eye on it, as it’s on the upper end of normal) 130/85 to 139/89
- **Mild hypertension:** 140/90 to 159/99
- **Moderate hypertension:** 160/100 to 179/109
- **Severe hypertension:** More than 180/110

Consult your doctor if your blood pressure is above the normal range.



What are the **indicators** and **symptoms** of **dangerously high blood pressure**?

- Severe headache, getting worse.
- Chest pain.
- Difficulty breathing.
- Drowsiness and confusion.
- New onset vision problems.

If you have any of these symptoms, consult a doctor immediately – you may be in grave danger of complications of high blood pressure.

Remember: A number of factors can cause hypertension – even if you maintain a healthy lifestyle. The best way to manage your blood pressure is to work closely with your doctor.

TAKE NOTE:

If you are younger than 60 years

Your blood pressure should be below 140/90

If you are 60 years or older

Your blood pressure should be below 150/90

If you have certain other conditions

Your doctor might set other targets for you

A HEART-HEALTHY DIET

Keep your hypertension in check and reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke by eating:

- A variety of **fresh food**
- **High-fibre starchy foods** such as seed bread instead of white bread
- **Healthy proteins** such as chicken, fish, lean meat and eggs
- **Low-fat dairy** foods
- **Dried beans, split peas, lentils and soya**
- Five portions of different **fruits and green, leafy vegetables** every day
- **Less salt and salty foods** such as stock cubes, soup powders, cured meat, sauces and potato crisps
- More **vegetable oils** such as olive and canola oil, and less hard fat, such as butter and margarine
- **Less sugar, sugary foods and drinks**



YES YOU CAN! Tips for blood pressure (BP) control

Too much salt in the food you eat can interfere with your BP control and may mean you will have to use more medication to get your BP to target level. A daily intake of less than 5g salt (less than 2g sodium) – that’s about 1 teaspoon – is recommended for South Africans. This is not much when you consider that three-quarters of the salt you eat is already in the food you buy. Check all food labels to find out which ones are high and low in salt content. If the label has more than 1.5g of salt (or 0.6g of sodium) per 100g, it is a high salt content food. It is a good idea to, whenever possible, choose “no salt added” foods.

Remember that certain medication can interfere with your BP control e.g. anti-inflammatory pain medication often used for arthritis, and cough and cold preparations. Certain supplements and drinks, e.g. ginseng, arnica, bitter lemon/orange, St John Wort, liquorice, and energy drinks can sabotage your BP control.

Herbal supplements aren’t necessarily safe because they’re natural. You may need to avoid supplements that raise your blood pressure or interfere with your blood pressure medication. Check with your doctor before taking any supplements and before making any changes to your blood pressure medication.

Stimulants, alcohol and many illegal drugs will raise your blood pressure. Keeping your blood pressure under control WILL REDUCE YOUR RISK of HEART DISEASE and STROKE. It’s a fact. You owe it to yourself and your family.

More tips ...

- **Keep checking.** If you have high blood pressure, have your blood pressure checked regularly (at least every 6 months).
- **Stay active.** Try to do a little bit of exercise every day. The more you do the better, but any exercise at all is better than no exercise. Take the stairs instead of the lift!
- **Drop a jeans size.** Aim to lose 0.5–1kg per week if you’re overweight. A dietician can help.
- **Kick the habit.** If you smoke, stop. Your blood pressure will improve almost instantly. After about a year, your risk of heart disease will have dropped by HALF.
- **Don’t hesitate, meditate!** For your overall health, do whatever you need to do to keep your stress levels in check.
- **Pop that pill.** Take your blood pressure medication as prescribed. Do not make changes to your medication without talking to your doctor first.



WHAT IS SUBSTANCE ABUSE?

It is the excessive use of drugs and alcohol. This could either be in a casual setting, social drinking, drug experimentation or more serious addictive behaviour like binge drinking and constant drug abuse.




WHO IS AFFECTED BY SUBSTANCE ABUSE?

It is important to know that alcohol and substance abuse can be harmful to your body, mind – and other people. When you are in the grip of an addiction, you can become angry, irritable, anxious and even dangerous to those around you. Drugs contain chemicals that can actually change the way the body works and cause reactions like extreme anger and violence.



South Africa is one of the top 10 substance-abusing countries in the world. And, it is a problem that is worsening.

Source: World Health Organization, 2015



Substance abuse can cause interpersonal relationship problems with family and friends, work-related issues, financial difficulties and physical harm to your brain, heart, kidney and liver. It can even cause suicidal tendencies.

How does **substance abuse** begin?

People turn to drugs and alcohol for many reasons.

The most common are:

- To forget or escape reality.
- To deal with depression, anxiety or other mental illnesses.
- As a way of relieving stress.
- As a relaxation tool.
- As a confidence booster.
- Because friends, family and other acquaintances do so as well.
- For enjoyment.
- As a result of boredom.
- As a bad habit.



HELP IS AT HAND

An addiction can make life very difficult and you may experience ongoing symptoms such as depression and anxiety.

The first step to conquering the problem is, of course, admitting you have one. Once you recognise the signs and symptoms – get help immediately. Remember, there are millions of people who go through substance abuse, so you are not alone or unusual, and don't need to feel like an outsider.

As each person is different, so too are the treatment methods. For the most part, substance abuse treatment deals with detoxification (where the body starts to rid itself of the substance), counselling and therapy, medication, and treatment for other issues such as depression and anxiety.

Overcoming substance abuse is not an overnight task. You need to commit for the long term and this is where family and professional support is also essential.



Help is easy to come by. You have access to various professionals who can help you find a treatment centre, counsellors and other resources you need to overcome substance abuse:

- Your doctor – speak to your family doctor, who can advise you on the best treatment option for you.
- POLMED members can contact our Mental Health Care Managers on 0860 765 633 for more information about drug and alcohol abuse, and where to find help.
- Serving SAPS members can make use of a network of clinical and counselling psychologists as well as social workers that have been contracted by POLMED to offer support. The benefit is exclusive to the providers registered on the network who are all in private practice, thereby ensuring confidentiality and creating a secure, private and supportive environment. A list of the network providers is available on the SAPS intranet, POLMED website or via the Client Service Call Centre on 0860 POLMED (0860 765 633). You can also contact us via email: Polpsych@medscheme.co.za



ABOUT BIPOLAR MOOD DISORDER

Bipolar mood disorder is a serious medical illness that goes hand in hand with extreme, unusual mood changes that can be tricky to control. If you have this disorder, you'll be all too familiar with the cycle of feeling low or depressed on some days and extremely happy or even euphoric (the "manic" phase) on others. This can be exhausting, devastating and destructive. The good news is that medication, psychotherapy and good support can help you lead a normal life.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Mania:

- Abnormally high, euphoric mood
- Extreme irritability
- Anger or aggression
- Increased energy, activity and restlessness
- High self-esteem and self-confidence, feeling superior to others
- Decreased need for sleep
- More talkative than usual, and talking rapidly and loudly
- Racing thoughts and jumping from one idea to another, making it difficult for others to follow
- Distractibility and difficulty concentrating
- Poor judgement, making impulsive decisions
- Excessive involvement in pleasurable activities that can have unfortunate consequences (such as spending sprees or sexual indiscretions)
- Abuse of drugs and alcohol
- Denial that anything is wrong

Other symptoms:

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 that others can't, or feeling that you have special powers.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Depression:

- Intense sadness or emptiness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities previously enjoyed
- Feelings of guilt, despair and worthlessness
- Change in sleeping patterns
- Loss of energy
- Change in appetite
- Difficulty concentrating and remembering
- Restlessness or irritability
- Thoughts of death or suicide



RED ALERT!

If left untreated, bipolar mood disorder can harm your relationships and career, and may even increase your risk for suicide. It's **important to seek help.**



Did you know:

- Bipolar mood disorder was formerly known as "manic depression", and is more **common** than previously believed.
- The exact causes aren't known, but it often **runs in families**. In other words, your genes could play a role.
- The disorder lasts a lifetime and usually appears between **ages 15 and 24**.
- It affects **both men and women**.
- The severity and symptoms **vary greatly** from person to person.

TREATING BIPOLAR MOOD DISORDER

Treatment of bipolar mood disorder usually includes a combination of medication (e.g. mood stabilisers, amongst others) and psychotherapy ("talk therapy"). Often the mania symptoms are tackled with one set of drugs, while other drugs are used to treat depression. During severe episodes of depression or mania, you may require hospitalisation.



FIND FRIENDS WHO UNDERSTAND

Good support can be a lifesaver when the going gets tough. Visit www.bipolar.co.za to find a support group in your area.

REMEMBER:

You should **ALWAYS** take your medication as prescribed – most probably for the rest of your life. Under no circumstances should you miss or skip your medication without first talking to your doctor.



ABOUT DEPRESSION

Depression is not the same as occasional sadness or “the blues”. Everyone feels down or low at some stage, but when these lows last for long periods of time and affect your day-to-day life and behaviour, you may have depression – a serious medical illness. Depression can’t be wished away and it’s not possible to just “pull yourself together”. But with the right support and help, most people experience relief of symptoms.

DID YOU KNOW?

Depression is a disorder of the brain. The exact causes can be difficult to pinpoint, but brain chemistry, hormones, genetics and life events could play a role. Interestingly, women are affected twice as often as men.



What are the **signs** and **symptoms**?

Depression affects different people differently. However, common symptoms include:

- Feeling sad or empty for longer periods than feeling content or happy.
- Feeling overwhelmed with life’s problems, and not being able to cope.
- Being easily irritated and more aggressive than usual.
- Loss of energy, loss of motivation.
- Difficulty sleeping, or sleeping more than usual.
- Thoughts of death or suicide.
- Frequently tearful.
- Struggling to concentrate and make decisions.
- Loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy.
- Feeling worthless.
- Weight loss or weight gain.



RED ALERT!

Do you suspect that you might have depression? See your doctor as soon as you can. And seek help immediately if you think you may hurt yourself or attempt suicide.

TAKE NOTE:

Depression often goes hand in hand with other conditions and complications, such as anxiety, alcohol or drug abuse, social isolation, relationship and work problems, and self-harming behaviour.

TREATING DEPRESSION

If you have more than mild depression, your doctor will most probably discuss:

Psychotherapy - also known as “talk therapy” (this will help you to understand the illness and teach you strategies to cope).

Antidepressants - pills that help to rebalance your brain chemistry (be sure to take them exactly as your doctor prescribed).

Or a combination of these two.



FACT:

Depression and hormonal changes often go hand in hand, so watch out for symptoms during adolescence, pregnancy, and during and after menopause.

MORE TIPS



Stay active

Many studies show that regular exercise can help to combat depression. Besides lifting your mood, it offers other health benefits, such as lowering blood pressure, protecting against heart disease and improving self-esteem and sleep patterns. The trick is having the motivation to start exercising. Set small daily activity goals and work from there.



Follow a healthy diet

Eat lots of fresh, healthy foods for your overall health.



Don’t hesitate, meditate!

Do whatever you need to do to keep your stress levels in check. Consider signing up for meditation, yoga, Pilates, art or music classes.



Get into a good sleep routine

Try to get between 7 and 8 hours of sleep per night, avoid daytime naps if you can’t sleep at night, and talk to your doctor if you have trouble sleeping or if you feel like sleeping all the time.



Steer clear of alcohol and illegal substances

These will worsen the situation in the long run.



Write it down

Many people with depression find it helps to put their thoughts on paper.

ABOUT POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)

Have you been through a stressful experience? An incident that has left you feeling unstable? Are you finding it difficult to mentally move past the incident? If it's causing you feelings of stress, trauma and ongoing negativity, you may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).



THE STIGMA AROUND PTSD

As in the case of most mental illnesses, PTSD is not always seen as a “real” concern or “valid” illness – which means there is still a lot of confusion and lack of awareness around the issue. Some people see it as a sign of weakness, attention-seeking behaviour or even as a moral failing.



WHERE CAN I FIND HELP AND TREATMENT?

The good news is that the thinking around this condition is changing. In South Africa, the high incidence of violent crime has created many PTSD sufferers, leading to the establishment of support programmes and counselling services.



WHAT TRIGGERS PTSD?

Stressful factors that might provoke PTSD are experiences that are typically “abnormal”, that is, outside the range of normal human experiences. PTSD affects the mind and body, and you may find yourself having emotional and physical reactions because of PTSD.



You may have **PTSD** if you:

- Have experienced or witnessed a traumatic situation. It may have been a death, or serious injury to yourself or someone else, and the experience made you react with fear, helplessness or terror.
- Continuously re-experience that event through persistent thoughts and dreams, or “flashbacks”. You act or feel as if the event is happening again and constantly experience those disturbing feelings.
- Avoid anything associated with that event and try to numb your feelings by using substances like drugs or alcohol and avoid all conversation, activities, places or people that you associate with that trauma.
- Are not able to remember important things about the experience and have lost interest in normal everyday activities and hobbies.
- Feel distant and detached from friends and family, and find yourself struggling to have loving relationships.
- Feel bleak and sad about the future.
- Have moments of irritability, angry outbursts, temper tantrums, difficulty concentrating, difficulty sleeping and extreme fear about your safety.

When these symptoms continue for longer than a month – causing distress or affecting your ability to work and interact with others – you may be suffering from PTSD. The longer PTSD goes untreated, the more likely it is to lead to other serious problems such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder, anxiety disorder, acute stress disorder and depression.

GET HELP NOW!

There is no need to suffer in silence. Ask for help – and make an active decision to work through the matter. Some of the steps you can take to deal with PTSD include:

- Speaking to your doctor. Treating PTSD may involve a combination of medication and talk therapy. Your doctor will guide you on what is most appropriate for you. The type of medication will depend on your symptoms and the possible side effects. Most medication takes a few weeks before it starts working. Your doctor may also refer you to a psychotherapist for cognitive behavioural therapy, a type of talk therapy.
- Make full use of the network of clinical and counselling psychologists as well as social workers that have been contracted by POLMED to offer support to serving South African Police Service (SAPS) members who are employed under the SAPS Act and registered on POLMED. The benefit is exclusive to the providers registered on the network and for serving SAPS members. All the providers on the network are in private practice, thereby ensuring confidentiality and creating a secure, private and supportive environment. A list of the network providers is available on the SAPS intranet, POLMED website or via the Client Service Call Centre on 0860 POLMED (0860 765 633). You can also contact us via email: Polpsych@medscheme.co.za
- POLMED members can contact our Mental Health Care Managers on 0860 765 633 for more information about PTSD and how you can find help.

i HELPING LOVED ONES COPE WITH SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Substance abuse is the excessive use of drugs or alcohol. This could either be in a casual setting, during social drinking, drug experimentation or more serious addictive behaviour like binge drinking and constant drug abuse.



HOW DOES SUBSTANCE ABUSE BEGIN?

People turn to drugs and alcohol for many reasons. The most common are:

- To forget or escape reality.
- To deal with depression, anxiety or other mental illnesses.
- As a way of relieving stress.
- As a relaxation tool.
- As a confidence booster.
- Because friends, family and other acquaintances do so as well.
- For enjoyment.
- As a result of boredom.
- As a bad habit.



WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- **Plan a strategy:** How will you approach the situation? You may be angry, frustrated and sad about the situation but it would be unwise to tackle the issue with these emotions running high. Try to get a conversation going, NOT a confrontation. Plan a day, time and quiet space in which to speak.
- **Get advice from an expert:** Equip yourself with the facts, treatment options and other pertinent information. When you sit down with your loved one, use all the information at your disposal to find a way forward – for the both of you. Be prepared with solutions, and do not just vent about the problem.
- **Be prepared for conflict:** Substance abuse can cause interpersonal relationship problems between family and friends, work-related issues, financial difficulties and even physical harm to the substance abuser. Prepare yourself for all the negativity and trouble that may come.
- **Don't be part of the problem:** Try and stay calm – if you are hysterical, you could be making things worse. Yes, we all sometimes suffer from shock, but 'losing it' in the heat of the crisis will never make it better. Breathe deeply, and focus on the treatment and rehabilitation process that lies ahead.

- **Focus on practical things:** Start with ensuring that they eat well. A healthy diet can help with balancing mood swings and restoring a feeling of wellbeing. Avoid stimulants which increase anxiety, e.g. coffee, soft drinks and chocolate. Vitamin supplements and tonics may be helpful – it's best to ask your doctor or pharmacist about these.
- **Understand that the person is literally "under the influence":** This means that he or she is not really themselves, so may not react or act the way you would expect. Some substance abusers can get violent when confronted or when undergoing treatment. Take this into consideration and ensure you are safe at all times. Acknowledge the fact that if violence arises, you may have to call the police. Do not allow YOURSELF to become a victim.

OTHER THINGS TO CONSIDER:

- **Staging an intervention.** If they have not admitted to the problem, you may have to gather supportive friends or family to stage an intervention. Speak to a professional about the best way to do this.
- **Finding a suitable rehabilitation centre.** Some points to consider: Is it close to your home for regular visits, what is the general environment like, what sort of treatments do they administer, is it affordable, is it paid for by your medical scheme, etc.
- **Organising time off work for your loved one** should they have to be in a long-term facility.

REMEMBER!

Repeated drug use can actually change the substance abuser's brain. So, in those moments when you are frustrated at how slowly they may be progressing, try to remember that these changes in the brain are making the quitting process more difficult and time-consuming. An addiction can make life very difficult and the person may experience ongoing symptoms such as depression and anxiety. As each person is different, so too are the treatment methods. For the most part, substance abuse treatment deals with detoxification (where the body starts to rid itself of the substance), counselling and therapy. Medication and treatment for associated issues such as depression and anxiety may also be necessary.



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HELPING LOVED ONES COPE WITH DEMENTIA

Dementia is defined as the progressive deterioration (gradual weakening) of mental functions such as learning, memory, orientation and problem-solving. Though memory loss usually occurs in dementia, having memory loss alone does not mean you have dementia. There is a certain extent of memory loss that is part of the normal ageing process. If you are concerned that a loved one may have dementia, it is best to contact your general practitioner (GP).



UNDERSTANDING DEMENTIA

When a friend, family member or loved one is in the grips of dementia, you may be scared or frustrated by the changes in their behaviour. Most dementia sufferers experience a slow decline over time.

Many symptoms and behavioural problems associated with dementia may be treated without drugs. The doctor will prescribe treatment based on the specific kind of problem. Where necessary, your doctor may prescribe medication for problems associated with the illness, such as depression or aggression.

Dementia occurs as a result of progressive damage to nerve cells in the brain. Factors contributing to the damage vary. Below are the most common causes of dementia:

- Alzheimer's disease (the most common cause of dementia). The exact mechanism of Alzheimer's disease is not fully understood, but it usually only occurs in people over the age of 65.
- Vascular dementia (blockages in small blood vessels in the brain). This causes small areas of brain tissue to die. People with diabetes, hypertension, or those who have had a stroke are most at risk.
- Lewy body dementia – characterised by clumps of protein in the brain and fluctuations of symptoms.

Other disorders linked to dementia include:

- Parkinson's disease – people with Parkinson's disease often develop dementia.
- Traumatic brain injury – repetitive injury to the brain (such as injuries that occur in sports like boxing) may cause dementia years later, although it also sometimes occurs after a single injury.

Some conditions may cause dementia-like symptoms which may resolve if the cause is successfully treated. These include:

- Infections like untreated syphilis or brain infections like meningitis or encephalitis.
- Metabolic problems like thyroid problems and low blood sugar.
- Certain medication side effects.
- Poor nutrition, including Vitamin B1 (thiamine), B6 or B12 deficiency. Vitamin B deficiencies commonly occur in people who chronically abuse alcohol.



COMMON SYMPTOMS OF DEMENTIA

Usually the symptoms may develop slowly over time. They include:

- Forgetfulness
- Confusion
- Trouble expressing oneself
- Difficulty concentrating and reasoning
- Difficulty with usual tasks such as paying the bills
- Getting lost in familiar places

As the condition progresses, dementia sufferers may experience:

- Depression
- Anger or aggression
- Paranoia or fear of others
- Difficulty with simple tasks such as eating, dressing or bathing
- Loss of control over their bladder and bowel.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

Your support and care will go a long way in easing the journey for your loved one. After you have identified the best long-term care options, you can work on the day-to-day processes.

- **Keep them active:** It is important to maintain some sort of social life and social activity. Daily routines, chores and outings will help immensely in maintaining some sort of normalcy.
- **Know when to back off:** Just like you, the person with dementia also has moods and may not always feel up to a certain task. Ask yourself if it really matters if they don't have a bath right now. Try again a bit later.
- **Give them some independence:** Allow them to help with minor daily activities if they're able. Let them do as much as they can for themselves.
- **Ask the experts:** If you feel lost, confused or stressed, ask your doctor for advice or suggestions. You are never going to have all the answers immediately, so ask as many questions as possible.
- **Understand your responsibilities:** You are now more than likely responsible for things such as getting the bills paid on time or seeing to daily admin tasks – things that may be impossible for someone suffering from dementia to handle.
- **Take time for yourself:** Arrange with another caregiver to fill in for a day or night so you too can have a breather.
- **Communicate with the caregiver:** If there is a permanent day-to-day caregiver at hand, be sure to communicate and share information on your loved one's condition, milestones, challenges and progress.
- **Be sensitive:** It goes without saying, but it is vital to remember that some days are going to be tougher than others. Try to avoid confrontation and conflict. Keep talking even if the person does not communicate back and try to avoid correcting them if they make a mistake or cannot remember something. Be as patient and empathetic as you possibly can.
- **Get help:** Join a caregiver's support group to maintain your own mental wellness.

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HELPING LOVED ONES COPE WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

A mental illness affects the way a person experiences and behaves in the world around them. It often doesn't have only one cause, and can be influenced by a combination of biological, psychological and social factors. These factors may include a person's genetics, the presence of other chronic illnesses such as diabetes or chronic pain, difficult social circumstances, or traumatic life experiences. Mental illness is not a sign of weakness or evil, it is a medical condition in the same way as diabetes and high blood pressure, for example.

Anxiety disorders and depression are common mental health problems, both globally and in South Africa. Other examples of mental illnesses include:

- Eating disorders
- Anxiety disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and obsessive-compulsive disorder
- Bipolar mood disorder
- Psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia
- Personality disorders



RECOGNISE THE SIGNS

The signs and symptoms of mental illness can vary depending on the specific illness. In general, you may find your loved one or family member experiencing any of these symptoms:

- Frequently sad, depressed and gloomy .
- Major changes in eating habits; either not hungry for long periods of time 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 may be a sign of underlying mental illness.



5 WAYS YOU CAN HELP:

- Learn as much as you can about the specific illness. The more information you have, the better equipped you will be to provide support and empathy.
- It is easy to go after every "cure" you come across, but it is so important to your own wellbeing to keep your expectations realistic. Your general practitioner (GP) can be a good place to start to help you and your family member get access to the care and support they need. Speak to your doctor regularly and assess which treatments or options are worth following up on, and which are just not worth the time or money.
- While you want to empathise and be there every step of the way, you must also try to take a step back and realise that you cannot take personal responsibility for the illness. Remember, it is something that is out of your control; you have not caused it, and you cannot "fix" it. All you can do is offer support and care.
- Take care of yourself! Often, when we are dealing with a family member's trauma, our own needs are forgotten and we neglect ourselves. Everything becomes about the person who has the "real" issue. Take time out, connect with friends, take a walk... you will be a better source of support when you are well rested.
- Community support groups for families and friends can offer you a place to share your experiences and learn from others going through the same thing.



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