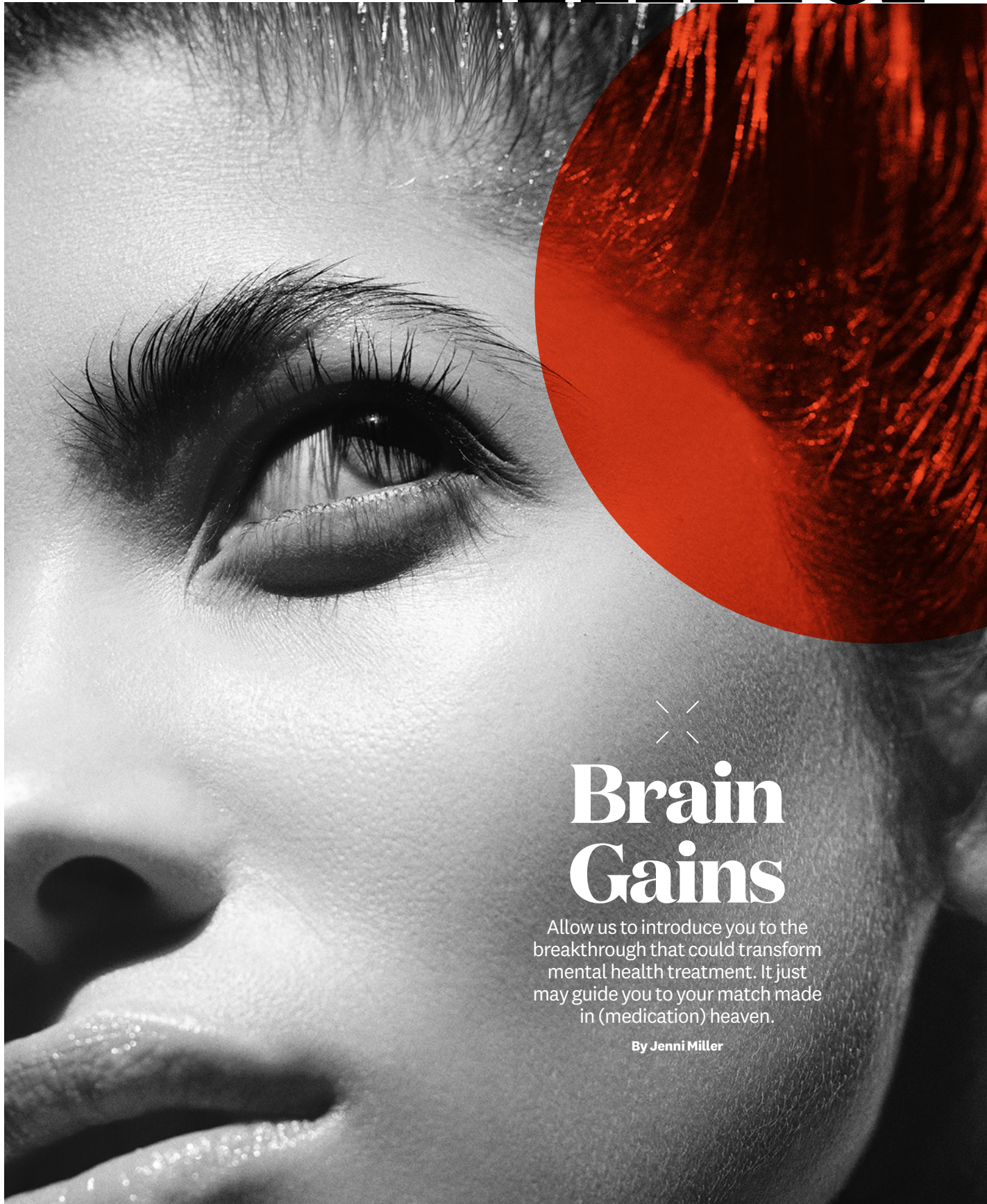


mind



Brain Gains

Allow us to introduce you to the breakthrough that could transform mental health treatment. It just may guide you to your match made in (medication) heaven.

By Jenni Miller

\$300–\$400

Typical out-of-pocket
cost for a PGx test.
Insurance or Medicare?
May be covered!

Managing my mental health has been a balancing act for decades, ever since I was diagnosed with obsessive-compulsive disorder at the age of 9. As an adult, I've patched together, through trial and error, a regimen to deal with it that ideally—*ideally*—includes talk therapy, exercise, acupuncture, journaling, and meditation. Over the years, I've also tried countless medications in various combinations.

But the pandemic made it brutally clear that my meds and I had been staggering along for way too long. I was swallowing an increasingly convoluted cocktail that was not only ineffective but eating away at my quality of life. I couldn't concentrate, recall words, or spell without autocorrect. The virus also triggered my deepest OCD contamination fears and sent me back into the grief of my mother's death in 2018. I made do on adrenaline and panic for a while, but by fall 2020, I was desperate.

Late one night, I found a website for a mental health–focused genomic testing kit, which promised comprehensive genetic guidance for smarter Rx decisions based on a simple cheek swab. All I needed was a prescription from my psychiatrist (who was more than used to my insomnia-fueled research) and my credit card. My doc had heard about such testing but hadn't tried it with clients herself—and said she was on board if I was. I purchased the kit, excited to see what it could offer, and began my journey into a whole new world of help. Come along....



The Trend

Pharmacogenomics (lotta Scrabble points there, I'd imagine), or PGx, is the study of how our genes affect the way our bodies respond to medication. That's exactly what these test kits do: They look at how your genes will impact, say, whether you experience side effects your doctor should be aware of, whether your dosage may need to be higher or lower, or if you might be better off trying another drug altogether. (Typically you just have to figure out your best regimen hit-or-miss style with your doc, which can be a lengthy and frustrating process for finding relief.) Genomind and GeneSight are two of the most well-known PGx tests on the market. And 23andMe got into the game, too, with the only direct-to-consumer report in the U.S., although it looks at fewer genes than the others.

In the past, PGx tests have commonly been used to determine courses of treatment for certain cancers. Their application in mental health treatment is more controversial, as experts question if they're as actionable as the hype makes them out to be—but that hasn't stopped them from becoming increasingly popular.



The Process

After you pick a specific test with the help of your doc, you'll usually provide a saliva swab and wait for results, which go straight to your physician in the form of a user-friendly report full of charts and diagrams with the names of actual drugs and insight about each one based on your genes. From there, you two talk through adjustments that make sense for your mental health status.

Worth flagging? The fact that your info goes directly to your MD (save for the 23andMe DTC report, though it'll urge you to work with a health-care provider in going over the results) emphasizes how crucial it is to make this trend a collaborative exercise with a clinician who knows your medical history and lifestyle and can interpret the results accordingly. Switching up meds on your own or attempting to go cold turkey can be extremely dangerous.



The Drawbacks

One sticky part of all this is that the effects of a drug are much more complicated than the specific gene variants uncovered by your swab can predict for. "These genes could have thousands of mutations, but you're just testing one or two," says Gonzalo Laje, MD, who has firsthand experience from researching and developing these tests in the late 2000s at the National Institute of Mental Health. "That's the first step—don't take these reports as gospel."

But perhaps the biggest hurdle: While the test results can offer info on what drugs may work best for your body and genetic makeup, there are still lots of *other* factors in play. Age, diet, your hormonal state, your gut bacteria, and any other drugs you're taking at the same time can all impact how you metabolize various drugs, says Sue Varma, MD, a psychiatrist in New York City, who also stresses that it's important to manage expectations.



The Possibilities

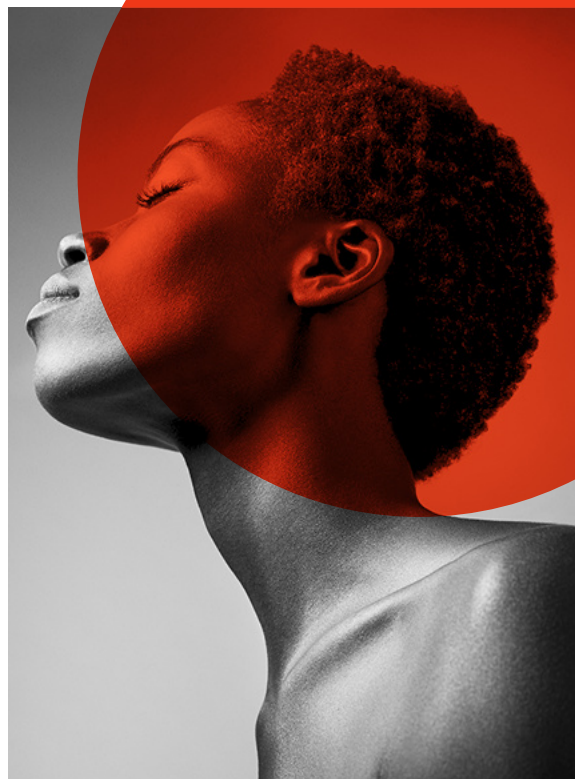
Even with caveats, though, there are plenty of people who may benefit. And as it turned out, I was the ideal candidate—someone who has lots of experience with medication, stubborn mental health issues, and tricky Rx's. Laura Dalheim, MD, a psychiatrist based in New York City, uses PGx tests on occasion, though she is careful not to overpromise: "I have had a few patients with histories of difficulty finding effective treatments who really benefited." If a patient asks to go this route, Dr. Varma works to make the PGx test another data point in a holistic relationship between physician and patient. "I want patients to feel empowered and included," she says.

In my case? While not every piece of info was illuminating, my doctor and I took my results into account as we plotted a new chapter. I tapered off the mood stabilizer, which made an immediate difference in cognition, and I'm investigating other migraine treatments, too, based on my data. I've also started taking a supplement and a different antidepressant. I have more energy than I've had in ages, and I've also regained my zest for self-care activities, like going on walks.



The Future

One word: *bright*. Pharmacogenomics is a billion-dollar industry, per a recent report, and a number of large clinical trials are in progress. For now, these tests can help a select group of (very grateful) people, and they illustrate the power of prescribing *personalized* treatments based on more than just symptoms.



24%

of people who were taking a prescription for depression and/or anxiety said they altered the quantity, strength, or type of drug due to the pandemic, according to a recent survey. Of that group, nearly a quarter started on a med for the first time to deal with one or both of their issues.

Source: GoodRx