

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a serious disorder which affects how a person thinks, feels and acts. Someone with schizophrenia may have difficulty distinguishing between what is real and what is imaginary; may be unresponsive or withdrawn; and may have difficulty expressing normal emotions in social situations. The vast majority of people with schizophrenia are not violent and do not pose a danger to others.

What Causes Schizophrenia?

The cause of schizophrenia is still unclear. Some theories about the cause of this disease include: genetics (heredity), biology (the imbalance in the brain's chemistry); and/or possible viral infections and immune disorders.

Genetics (Heredity). Scientists recognize that the disorder tends to run in families and that a person inherits a tendency to develop the disease. Schizophrenia may also be triggered by environmental events, such as viral infections or highly stressful situations or a combination of both. Similar to some other genetically-related illnesses, schizophrenia appears when the body undergoes hormonal and physical changes, like those that occur during puberty in the teen and young adult years.

Chemistry. People with schizophrenia have a chemical imbalance of brain chemicals which are neurotransmitters. The imbalance of these chemicals affects the way a person's brain reacts to stimuli. This problem in processing different sounds, sights, smells and tastes can also lead to hallucinations or delusions.

What are the Early Warning Signs of Schizophrenia?

The signs of schizophrenia are different for everyone. Symptoms may develop slowly over months or years, or may appear very abruptly. The disease may come and go in cycles of relapse and remission. Behaviors that are early warning signs of schizophrenia include:

- Hearing/seeing something that isn't there
- A constant feeling of being watched
- Peculiar or nonsensical way of speaking or writing
- Deterioration of academic/work performance
- A change in personal hygiene/appearance
- A change in personality
- Withdrawal from social situations
- Irrational, angry or fearful response to loved ones
- Inability to sleep or concentrate
- Inappropriate or bizarre behavior
- Extreme preoccupation with religion or the occult

In the United States approximately one in a hundred people, about 2.5 million, have this disease. It knows no racial, cultural or economic boundaries. Symptoms usually appear between the ages of 13 and 25, but often appear earlier in males than females.

What are the Symptoms of Schizophrenia?

Positive symptoms are disturbances that are "added" to the person's personality.

- Delusions - false ideas - individuals may believe that someone is spying on them or that they are someone famous.
- Hallucinations – seeing or hearing something that doesn't really exist. The most common experience is hearing imaginary voices that give commands or comments to the individual.



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- Disordered thinking and speech - moving from one topic to another, in a nonsensical fashion. Individuals may make up their own words or sounds.

Negative symptoms are capabilities that are “lost” from the person’s personality.

- Social withdrawal
- Extreme apathy
- Lack of drive or initiative
- Emotional unresponsiveness

How is Schizophrenia Treated?

No cure for schizophrenia has been discovered, but with proper treatment, many people with this illness can lead productive and fulfilling lives. If you suspect someone you know is experiencing symptoms of schizophrenia, encourage them to see a medical or mental health professional immediately. Early treatment can mean a better long-term outcome.

Recovery and Rehabilitation

Recovery is possible through a variety of services, including medication and rehabilitation programs. Rehabilitation can help a person recover the confidence and skills needed to live a productive and independent life in the community. Types of services that help a person with schizophrenia include:

- Case management
- Psychosocial rehabilitation programs
- Self-help groups
- Drop-in centers
- Housing programs
- Employment programs
- Therapy/counseling
- Crisis services

Antipsychotic Medication

The new generation of antipsychotic medications can help people with schizophrenia to live fulfilling lives. They help to reduce the biochemical imbalances that cause schizophrenia and decrease the likelihood of relapse. Like all medications, however, they should be taken only under the supervision of a mental health professional. There are two major types of antipsychotic medication:

- Conventional antipsychotics effectively control the “positive” symptoms such as hallucinations, delusions, and confusion of schizophrenia.
- New Generation (also called atypical) antipsychotics treat both the positive and negative symptoms of schizophrenia, often with fewer side effects.

Side effects are common with antipsychotic drugs. They range from mild side effects such as dry mouth, blurred vision, and dizziness which usually disappear after a few weeks to more serious side effects such as trouble with muscle control, pacing, tremors and facial ticks. The newer generation of drugs have fewer side effects. However, it is important to talk with your mental health professional before making any changes in medication since many side effects can be controlled.

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