

Schizophrenia

Fact: Schizophrenia affects about 1% of the U.S. population – that’s about 3 million people. It knows no racial, cultural or economic boundaries. Symptoms usually appear between the ages of 13 and 25, and often appear earlier in males than in females.

Schizophrenia is a serious disorder that affects how a person thinks, feels and acts. Someone who has schizophrenia may have difficulty distinguishing between what is real and what is imaginary; may be unresponsive or withdrawn; and may have difficulty expressing normal emotions in social situations.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, schizophrenia is not “split personality” or multiple personality. The vast majority of people who have schizophrenia are not violent and do not pose a danger to others. Schizophrenia is not caused by childhood experiences, poor parenting or lack of willpower. The symptoms are not identical for each person.

What causes schizophrenia?

The causes of schizophrenia are still unclear. Research suggests that the causes include genetics (heredity), biology (an imbalance in the brain’s chemistry); and 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.

Like some other genetically related illnesses, schizophrenia appears when the body undergoes hormonal and physical changes, such as those that occur during puberty in the teen and young adult years.

Biology (chemical imbalance): Genetics helps to determine how the brain uses certain chemicals. People with schizophrenia have a chemical imbalance of brain chemicals called serotonin and dopamine, which are neurotransmitters. These neurotransmitters allow nerve cells in the brain to send messages to each other. The imbalance of these chemicals affects the way a person’s brain reacts to stimuli – which explains why a person with schizophrenia may be overwhelmed by sensory information (loud music or bright lights) that other people can easily handle. 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. This disease may come and go in cycles of relapse and remission.

Warning Signs of schizophrenia include:

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

If you or a loved one experience several of these symptoms for more than two weeks, seek help immediately.

What are the symptoms of schizophrenia?

A medical or mental health professional may use the following terms when discussing the symptoms of schizophrenia.

Positive symptoms are disturbances that are “added” to the person’s personality:

- Delusions – Individuals experiencing delusions may believe that someone is spying on them or that they are someone famous.
- Hallucinations – People suffering from hallucinations see, feel, taste, hear or smell something that doesn't really exist. The most common experience is hearing imaginary voices that give commands or make comments to the individual.
- Disordered thinking and speech – Individuals with disordered thinking move from one topic to another in a nonsensical fashion. Individuals may make up their own words or sounds.

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Negative symptoms are characteristics that are “lost” from the person’s personality, and include:

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

What are the different types of schizophrenia?

- **Paranoid schizophrenia** – The person feels extremely suspicious, persecuted or grandiose, or experiences a combination of these emotions.
- **Disorganized schizophrenia** – The person is often incoherent in speech and thought but may not have delusions.
- **Catatonic schizophrenia** – The person is withdrawn, mute and negative, and often assumes very unusual body positions.
- **Residual schizophrenia** – The person is no longer experiencing delusions or hallucinations but has no motivation or interest in life.
- **Schizoaffective disorder** – The person has symptoms of both schizophrenia and a major mood disorder such as depression.

What treatments are available for schizophrenia?

If you suspect someone you know is experiencing symptoms of schizophrenia, encourage him or her to see a medical or mental health professional immediately. Early treatment – even as early as the first episode – can mean a better long-term outcome.

Recovery and rehabilitation: While no cure for schizophrenia exists, many people with this illness can lead productive and fulfilling lives with the proper treatment. Recovery is possible through a variety of services, including medication and rehabilitation programs. Rehabilitation can help a person recover confidence and skills needed to live independently in the community.

The types of services that can help a person with schizophrenia include:

- Case management, which helps people access services, financial assistance, treatment and other resources.
- Psychosocial rehabilitation programs, which help people regain skills such as obtaining and maintaining employment, cooking, cleaning, budgeting, shopping, socializing, problem solving and stress management.
- Self-help groups, in which individuals who have mental illnesses themselves provide ongoing support and information to other people with mental illnesses.
- Drop-in centers, which are places where individuals with mental illness can socialize, and receive informational support and services on an as-needed basis.
- Housing programs, which offer a range of support and supervision from 24-hour supervised living to drop-in support, as needed.

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- Employment programs, which assist individuals in finding employment and gaining the skills necessary to re-enter the workforce.
- Therapy/counseling, which includes different forms of “talk” therapy, such as individual and group therapies, that can help both the patient and family members to better understand the illness and share their concerns.
- Crisis services include 24-hour hotlines, after-hours counseling, residential placement and in-patient hospitalization.

Medication: 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, antipsychotic medications should be taken only under supervision of a mental health professional. There are two major types of antipsychotic medication:

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

Fact: No cure for schizophrenia has been discovered, but with proper treatment, many people with this illness can lead productive and fulfilling lives.

Side effects are common with antipsychotic drugs. They range from mild side effects such as dry mouth, blurred vision, constipation, drowsiness 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’s important to talk with your mental health professional before making any changes in medication. Many side effects can be controlled.

For more information, contact Mental Health America of Wisconsin at (414) 276-3122, or visit our web site at www.mhawisconsin.org.

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