

# Schizophrenia

## What is schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a serious condition that causes changes in your thoughts, emotions, and behavior. If you have this condition you may:

- Hear voices that others do not
- Have behavior that is unusual
- Say things that others do not understand
- Not be able to tell what is real from what is imagined
- Not show your emotions

Schizophrenia usually causes serious problems in everyday activities.

## What is the cause?

The exact cause of this disorder is not known.

- The brain makes chemicals that affect thoughts, emotions, and actions. Without the right balance of these chemicals, there may be problems with the way you think, feel, or act. People with this disorder may have too little or too much of some of these chemicals.
- If a woman has a virus or nutrition problems while she is pregnant, it increases the risk that the child will develop schizophrenia later in life. Low oxygen levels from long labor or premature birth may also increase the risk.
- Schizophrenia tends to run in families. If a child has one parent who has schizophrenia, then the chances of the child developing it are 10 times that of other children. This is true even if the child grows up away from the parent with schizophrenia.
- Stress also plays a part. Schizophrenia is not caused by poor parenting, child abuse, or neglect. However, a lot of stress and abuse may make the symptoms come sooner and be more severe.
- People with this disorder may have physical changes in their brain. These changes may mean that some parts of the brain are more active or less active than in other people.
- Some drugs can cause schizophrenia symptoms. These include LSD, cocaine, and amphetamines.

Schizophrenia usually starts in the late teens or in the twenties. Symptoms usually increase over 3 to 5 years. Sometimes schizophrenia starts suddenly over a few weeks. A few people have been diagnosed in childhood and some after age 40. Several million people in the United States are affected. It occurs slightly more often in men than in women.

## **What are the symptoms?**

No single symptom defines this illness. If you have this illness, you may have symptoms such as:

- Hearing, seeing, smelling, or feeling things that others do not
- Believing things that are not true, such as believing that others are trying to hurt you
- Having trouble keeping thoughts straight or stopping talking in the middle of a sentence
- Making up words that have no meaning
- Repeating certain motions over and over or not moving at all
- Having no facial expression, such as a smile or a frown
- Dressing oddly, like wearing winter gloves in summer
- Not bathing or combing your hair
- Speaking in a flat voice or talking to people very little or not at all
- Having trouble enjoying anything
- Having trouble using information to make a decision
- Having trouble paying attention

## **How is it diagnosed?**

Your healthcare provider or therapist will ask about your symptoms, medical and family history, and any medicines you are taking. He will make sure you do not have a medical illness or drug or alcohol problem that could cause the symptoms. You may have tests or scans to help make a diagnosis.

A mental health professional should make the final diagnosis. The diagnosis is made based on a thorough psychiatric interview with you and family members.

## **How is it treated?**

### **Medicines**

Medicines are the most important part of the treatment. Several types of medicines can help. Your healthcare provider will work with you to select the best one for you. You may need to take more than one type of medicine. These medicines may cause side effects, but you and your healthcare provider will watch for them. Your healthcare provider may change how much or how often you take your medicine, or change the medicine you have been taking.

It is important to stay on your medicine to keep your symptoms under control. If you are thinking about stopping your medicine, talk to your provider first. Antipsychotics should not be stopped suddenly or without your provider's okay.

### **Supportive therapy**

This disorder changes the way you relate to others and the way you think about everyday activities. Other people may be uncomfortable with your unusual or unexpected behavior and they may avoid you. People with schizophrenia are more

likely than other people to commit suicide, be a victim of crime, be arrested, or be homeless. Supportive therapy can help you learn about schizophrenia and get advice about how to manage daily challenges.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) focuses on thinking and behavior. The therapist helps you learn how to:

- Test the reality of your thoughts
- Ignore voices in your head
- Cope with stress
- Replace negative thoughts with positive thoughts
- Identify early warning signs that symptoms are getting worse
- Set goals and motivate yourself

Group therapy can help you deal with work, relationships, and drug therapy and side effects. It takes place in a group of 6 to 10 people, under the guidance of a therapist.

Family therapy is often very helpful. Family therapy treats all members of the family rather than working with one person alone. It helps the whole family to make changes.

The illness may make it hard to organize your thoughts, solve problems, and make decisions. You may have trouble taking care of yourself or telling others what you need. You will probably need a therapist or case manager to help you manage your daily needs. You may live in a group setting with others who also have this illness.

You may need to spend some time in a hospital if you are thinking about hurting yourself or someone else, or if you are unable to take care of yourself.

## How can I take care of myself?

- **Get support.** Talk with family and friends. Join a support group in your area.
- **Learn to manage stress.** Ask for help at home and work when the load is too great to handle. Find ways to relax, for example take up a hobby, listen to music, watch movies, or take walks. Try deep breathing exercises when you feel stressed.
- **Take care of your physical health.** Try to get at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Eat a healthy diet. Limit caffeine. If you smoke, quit. Avoid alcohol and drugs because they can make your symptoms worse. Exercise according to your healthcare provider's instructions.
- **Check your medicines.** To help prevent problems, tell your healthcare provider and pharmacist about all of the medicines, natural remedies, vitamins, and other supplements that you take. Take all medicines as directed by your provider or therapist. It is very important to take your medicine even when you are feeling and thinking well. Without the medicine, your symptoms may not improve or may get worse. Talk to your provider if you have problems taking your medicine or if the medicines don't seem to be working.

- **Contact your healthcare provider or therapist** if you have any questions or your symptoms seem to be getting worse. Sometimes this illness makes you afraid of even your provider or therapist. Watch for this and be honest with your provider or therapist about it.

Get emergency care if you or a loved one has serious thoughts of suicide or self-harm, violence, or harming others.

For more information, contact:

- National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)  
800-950-NAMI  
<http://www.nami.org>
- Mental Health America  
800-969-6642  
<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/>

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