

Schizophrenia: What You Need To Know

Schizophrenia is a serious mental illness, which affects how a person thinks, feels and acts. It is a disease that makes it difficult for a person to tell the difference between real and imagined experiences, to think logically, to express normal emotional responses or to behave normally in social situations.

Schizophrenia can be draining on both the person with schizophrenia and their families. People with schizophrenia often have difficulty functioning in society, at work and in school. Family members may have to help out financially and make sure that medication is taken as prescribed.

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

Schizophrenia--Who's Likely To Suffer From It?

Schizophrenia affects about 1% of the world population. In the United States, about 2.5 million people have this disease. Symptoms usually appear between the ages of 15 and 35, but often appear earlier in males than females.

Schizophrenia is NOT a "split personality."
Bad parenting does NOT cause schizophrenia.
Schizophrenia is NOT caused by personal weakness.

What Causes Schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a complex and puzzling disease. There are several theories about the cause of this disease: genetics (heredity); imbalance in the brain's chemistry; complications during pregnancy and/or birth. However, it is not clear if one or all of these theories are a factor in causing the disease.

- **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 be triggered by environmental events, such as viral infections or highly stressful situations or a combination of both. Similar to 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.** Genetics help to determine how the brain uses certain chemicals. People with schizophrenia have a chemical imbalance which means they are either *very sensitive to* or *produce too much* of a brain chemical called dopamine. Dopamine, which is a neurotransmitter, allows nerve cells in the brain to send messages to each other. The imbalance of this chemical 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), which other people can easily handle. This problem in processing different sounds, sights, smells and tastes can also lead to hallucinations or delusions.
- **Complications during pregnancy and birth.** Some researchers suspect a viral infection, improper nutrition during pregnancy, or birth complications may increase the chances of a person developing schizophrenia.

What Are The Different Types Of Schizophrenia?

- **Paranoid schizophrenia** a person feels extremely suspicious, persecuted, grandiose, or experiences a combination of these emotions.
- **Disorganized schizophrenia** a person is often incoherent but may not have delusions.
- **Catatonic schizophrenia** a person is withdrawn, mute, negative and often assumes very unusual postures.
- **Residual schizophrenia** a person is no longer delusion or hallucinating, but has no motivation or interest in life. These symptoms can be most devastating.

What Are The Symptoms Of Schizophrenia?

The appearance of symptoms varies from person to person; symptoms may develop slowly over months or years, or may appear very abruptly.

Initial symptoms, which usually appear gradually, may include:

- Mild feelings of tension,
- Inability to sleep or concentrate, or
- Loss of interest in school, work and friends

As the disease becomes worse the individual may experience more disabling and bizarre symptoms such as:

- Delusions,
- Hallucinations or
- Disordered speech and thoughts.

Schizophrenia may appear in cycles known as relapse or remission. During times of relapse, the person suffering from schizophrenia may experience one or all of the following symptoms:

Delusions - false ideas. For example, individuals may believe that someone is spying on him or her, or that they are someone famous.

Hallucinations - imaginary voices which give commands or comments to the individual. It is less common for the person to think he or she sees, feels, tastes, or smells something which really doesn't exist.

Disordered thinking - moving from one topic to another, but making no sense. Individuals may make up their own words or sounds.

During periods of remission, psychotic symptoms may lessen, although some symptoms such as social withdrawal, inappropriate or blunted emotions and extreme apathy, may persist

What Treatments Are Available For Schizophrenia?

If you suspect someone you know is experiencing symptoms of schizophrenia, encourage them to see a psychiatrist. Psychiatrists are medical doctors who specialize in the treatment of mental illnesses. They can diagnose schizophrenia and have the authority to prescribe medications.

The psychiatrist will thoroughly interview the person to identify the signs and symptoms of schizophrenia; to date, however, there are no chemical tests for schizophrenia.

Antipsychotic Drugs

Schizophrenia is usually a lifelong disease. Most people with this illness will probably take medication for the rest of their lives, as do patients with diabetes or high blood pressure. Antipsychotic medications help to normalize the biochemical imbalances that cause schizophrenia. They are also important in reducing the likelihood of relapse. Like all medications, however, antipsychotic drugs should be taken only under close supervision of a psychiatrist or other physician.

There are two major types of antipsychotics, **traditional** and **new antipsychotics**.

Traditional antipsychotics effectively control the hallucinations, delusions, and confusion of schizophrenia. Side effects are common to many medications, including those for schizophrenia. Traditional antipsychotics have side effects, which may be mild, to serious; some only occurring at high doses.

Side effects for antipsychotics may cause a patient to stop taking them. *However, it is important to talk with your doctor before making any changes in medication since many side effects can be controlled. Be sure to weigh the risks against the potential benefits that antipsychotic drugs can provide.*

Mild side effects: dry mouth, blurred vision, constipation, drowsiness and dizziness. These side effects usually disappear a few weeks after the person starts treatment.

More serious side effects: trouble with muscle control, muscle spasms or cramps in the head and neck, fidgeting or pacing, tremors and shuffling of the feet (much like those affecting people with Parkinson's disease).

Side effects due to prolonged use of traditional antipsychotic medications: facial ticks, thrusting and rolling of the tongue, lip licking, panting and grimacing.

New antipsychotics

New medications are effective in treating a broader range of symptoms of schizophrenia, and have fewer side effects than traditional antipsychotics.

Counseling and Rehabilitation

People with schizophrenia often have a difficult time performing ordinary life skills such as cooking and personal grooming as well as communicating with others in the family and at work. Rehabilitation can help a person regain the confidence to take care of themselves and live a fuller life. Different forms of "talk" therapy, both individual and group, can help both the patient and family members to better understand the illness and share their coping problems.

Coping Guidelines For The Family:

1. Establish a daily routine for the patient to follow.
2. Help the patient stay on the medication.
3. Keep the lines of communication open about problems or fears the patient may have.
4. Understand that caring for the patient can be emotionally and physically exhausting. Take time for yourself.
5. Keep your communications simple and brief when speaking with the patient.
6. Be patient and calm.
7. Ask for help if you need it; join a support group.

Mental Health America of Franklin County is a private, not-for-profit organization, established in 1956. We are dedicated to promoting mental health in Franklin County through advocacy, education, and support services. Our programs include: information and referral to community mental health and alcohol/drug services; support groups for people with mental illness and their families; an Ombudsman program that assists clients in navigating the mental health and alcohol/drug system; mental health screenings in English and Spanish; community and professional mental health education and a newsletter for first-time parents available in both English and Spanish. We receive funding from the Franklin County ADAMH Board and United Way of Central Ohio. To become a member or find out more information, please visit us online at www.mhafc.org.