

Schizophrenia

Definition

Schizophrenia is a chronic and severe mental disorder that affects how a person thinks, feels, and behaves. People with schizophrenia may seem like they have lost touch with reality. Although schizophrenia is not as common as other mental disorders, the symptoms can be very disabling.

Signs and Symptoms

Symptoms of schizophrenia usually start between ages 16 and 30. In rare cases, children have schizophrenia too.

The symptoms of schizophrenia fall into three categories: positive, negative, and cognitive.

Positive symptoms: “Positive” symptoms are psychotic behaviors not generally seen in healthy people. People with positive symptoms may “lose touch” with some aspects of reality. Symptoms include:

- Hallucinations
- Delusions
- Thought disorders (unusual or dysfunctional ways of thinking)
- Movement disorders (agitated body movements)

Negative symptoms: “Negative” symptoms are associated with disruptions to normal emotions and behaviors. Symptoms include:

- “Flat affect” (reduced expression of emotions via facial expression or voice tone)
- Reduced feelings of pleasure in everyday life
- Difficulty beginning and sustaining activities
- Reduced speaking

Cognitive symptoms: For some patients, the cognitive symptoms of schizophrenia are subtle, but for others, they are more severe and patients may notice changes in their memory or other aspects of thinking. Symptoms include:

- Poor “executive functioning” (the ability to understand information and use it to make decisions)
- Trouble focusing or paying attention
- Problems with “working memory” (the ability to use information immediately after learning it)

Risk Factors

There are several factors that contribute to the risk of developing schizophrenia.

Genes and environment: Scientists have long known that schizophrenia sometimes runs in families. However, there are many people who have schizophrenia who don’t have a family member with the disorder and conversely, many people with one or more family members with the disorder who do not develop it themselves.

Scientists believe that many different genes may increase the risk of schizophrenia, but that no single gene causes the disorder by itself. It is not yet possible to use genetic information to predict who will develop schizophrenia.

Scientists also think that interactions between genes and aspects of the individual’s environment are necessary for schizophrenia to develop.

Environmental factors may involve:

- Exposure to viruses
- Malnutrition before birth
- Problems during birth
- Psychosocial factors

Different brain chemistry and structure: Scientists think that an imbalance in the complex, interrelated chemical reactions of the brain involving the neurotransmitters (substances that brain cells use to communicate with each other) dopamine and glutamate, and possibly others, plays a role in schizophrenia.

Some experts also think problems during brain development before birth may lead to faulty connections. The brain also undergoes major changes during puberty, and these changes could trigger psychotic symptoms in people who are vulnerable due to genetics or brain differences.

Treatments and Therapies

Because the causes of schizophrenia are still unknown, treatments focus on eliminating the symptoms of the disease. Treatments include:

Antipsychotics

Antipsychotic medications are usually taken daily in pill or liquid form. Some antipsychotics are injections that are given once or twice a month. Some people have side effects when they start taking medications, but most side effects go away after a few days. Doctors and patients can work together to find the best medication or medication combination, and the right dose.

Psychosocial Treatments

These treatments are helpful after patients and their doctor find a medication that works. Learning and using coping skills to address the everyday challenges of schizophrenia helps people to pursue their life goals, such as attending school or work. Individuals who participate in regular psychosocial treatment are less likely to have relapses or be hospitalized.

Coordinated specialty care (CSC)

This treatment model integrates medication, psychosocial therapies, case management, family involvement, and supported education and employment services, all aimed at reducing symptoms and improving quality of life.

How can I help someone I know with schizophrenia?

Caring for and supporting a loved one with schizophrenia can be hard. It can be difficult to know how to respond to someone who makes strange or clearly false statements. It is important to understand that schizophrenia is a biological illness.

Here are some things you can do to help your loved one:

- Get them treatment and encourage them to stay in treatment
- Remember that their beliefs or hallucinations seem very real to them
- Tell them that you acknowledge that everyone has the right to see things their own way
- Be respectful, supportive, and kind without tolerating dangerous or inappropriate behavior
- Check to see if there are any support groups in your area