

Schizophrenia

Topic Overview

Schizophrenia is a severe brain disorder that causes chronic mental health and cognitive development problems. Schizophrenia is often disabling and can profoundly affect all aspects of a person's life. It may interfere with the ability to think clearly, manage emotions, and interact with other people. The onset of schizophrenia usually occurs in adolescence or early adulthood. Symptoms can appear suddenly or may appear gradually, in which case the illness may not be recognized until it is in an advanced stage.

Schizophrenia affects almost 1% of the general population, meaning 1 out of every 100 people will develop it. Schizophrenia causes two groups of symptoms, which are referred to as negative symptoms and positive symptoms (psychosis):

- **Negative symptoms**
 - Poor motivation or apathy
 - Self-neglect, including physical neglect (such as not bathing)
 - Reduced or inappropriate emotion, such as showing no emotion at all or becoming angry with strangers
- **Positive symptoms**
 - Delusions
 - Hallucinations, usually hearing voices
 - Confused or disorganized speech or thoughts

Negative symptoms usually appear first and may be confused with depression. As the disorder progresses, it can be confused with other mental health problems such as manic episodes, substance abuse problems, or psychotic depression.

Several types of schizophrenia exist, but the most common type is paranoid schizophrenia. People with paranoid schizophrenia have frightening thoughts and hear threatening voices.

The cause of schizophrenia is not known. It is possible that it may be passed down in families. It may also be related to problems experienced during pregnancy that can damage a baby's developing nervous system (such as malnutrition or being exposed to a virus). There may be problems with the way the brain develops before birth, which can cause changes to neurotransmitter systems and the way they function.

Although there are currently no laboratory tests to confirm the presence of schizophrenia, several mental health exams and physical tests can be done to help diagnose schizophrenia or other schizophrenia spectrum disorders and rule out other conditions with similar symptoms.

While there is no known cure for schizophrenia, current research to identify the cause and develop better medications with less side effects is promising. Symptoms may be reduced or prevented with medications (such as antipsychotics) along with other treatments such as professional counseling. Unfortunately, some people with schizophrenia do not seek treatment for their condition, or they stop treatment too soon.

People with schizophrenia have an increased risk for suicide—1 in 10 people with this disorder commits suicide—so continuous treatment is important. They are also more likely to develop other social and physical conditions as a result of having schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia affects the entire family. It can be devastating to watch a family member who was once happily planning the future develop symptoms of confusion and paranoia. Family members often have very important roles in the lives and treatment of a person with schizophrenia. They may also need to seek treatment to help them cope with the demands of the illness and the loss they may feel.

Schizophrenia is not multiple personality disorder or split personality.

© 1995-2004, Healthwise, Incorporated, P.O. Box 1989, Boise, ID 83701. All Rights Reserved.
This information is not intended to replace the advice of a doctor.