

Introduction

Schizophrenia is a severe, lifelong brain disorder. People with schizophrenia may hear voices, see things that aren't there or believe that others are reading or controlling their minds. Many people with schizophrenia are disabled by their symptoms. But with treatment many people lead satisfying lives.

This reference summary will help you understand schizophrenia. It discusses the symptoms, causes and treatment of this disorder.



Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a chronic, severe and disabling brain disorder. The symptoms of schizophrenia may make it difficult to keep friends or a job. Schizophrenia may also make it hard for a person to care for himself or herself.

People with schizophrenia may hear voices other people do not hear. They may think other people are trying to hurt them. Sometimes they do not make sense when they talk.

Anyone can develop schizophrenia. It affects men and women equally in all ethnic groups. Teens can also develop schizophrenia. In rare cases, children have the illness too.

People with schizophrenia may also have other mental health problems, such as:

- Anxiety.
- Depression.
- Suicidal thoughts or actions.

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Symptoms

Schizophrenia symptoms range from mild to severe and usually start between ages 16 and 30. It is not common for people to get schizophrenia after age 45. In men, symptoms usually start in the late teens and early 20s. For women, they start in the mid 20s to early 30s.

Symptoms of schizophrenia are grouped into three different categories. Each category describes a certain type of symptom. The categories include:

- Positive.
- Negative.
- Cognitive.

Positive symptoms are symptoms that involve changes to a person's normal way of thinking and functioning. They are psychotic behaviors. People with these symptoms are sometimes unable to tell what's real and what is imagined.

Hallucinations are a type of positive symptom.

Hallucinations are when a person sees, hears, smells or feels things that no one else can. Hearing voices when nobody is speaking is common for people with schizophrenia.

Delusions are another positive symptom. Delusions are when a person believes things that are not true. For example, a person with schizophrenia may believe that people on the radio and television are talking directly to them. Or they may believe that other people are trying to hurt them.



Another positive symptom is thought disorders. Thought disorders are ways of thinking that are not usual or helpful. People with thought disorders may have trouble organizing their thoughts, stop talking in the middle of a thought or make up words that have no meaning.

Movement disorders are also a positive symptom. A person with a movement disorder may repeat certain motions over and over. In other cases, a person may stop moving or talking for a while. This is a rare condition called catatonia.

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Negative symptoms are associated with disruptions to normal emotions and behaviors. These symptoms are harder to recognize as part of the disorder and can be mistaken for depression or other conditions.

People with negative symptoms may:

- Have trouble having fun.
- Have trouble planning and sticking with an activity, like grocery shopping.
- Show no facial expression, like a smile or frown.
- Talk in a dull voice.
- Talk very little to other people, even when they need to.

Cognitive symptoms are subtle. Like negative symptoms, cognitive symptoms may be difficult to recognize. Cognitive symptoms include:

- Problems using information immediately after learning it.
- Trouble paying attention.
- Trouble using information to make decisions.

Cognitive symptoms often make it hard to lead a normal life and earn a living. They can cause great emotional distress.

Teens can develop schizophrenia. But it may be hard to see at first. This is because the symptoms may look like problems many teenagers have, such as:

- Being irritable or moody.
- Changing friends.
- Getting bad grades in school.
- Having trouble sleeping.



Causes

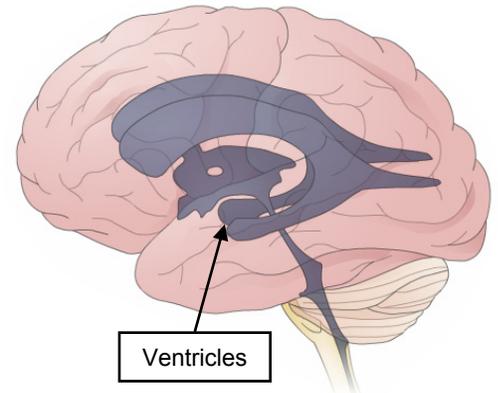
No one is sure what causes schizophrenia. But there are several known factors that may cause schizophrenia.

One factor that may cause schizophrenia is a person's genetic makeup. This means that schizophrenia may be related to the genes that a person inherited from his or her parents. You are more likely to develop schizophrenia if someone in your family has it.

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Environmental factors may also play a role in schizophrenia. Scientists think interactions between genes and the environment are necessary for schizophrenia to develop. Many environmental factors may be involved, such as exposure to viruses or malnutrition before birth, problems during birth, as well as other factors.

Scientists think that an imbalance in the chemical reactions of the brain plays a role in schizophrenia. Also, in small ways, the brains of people with schizophrenia look different than those of healthy people. For example, fluid-filled cavities at the center of the brain, called ventricles, are larger in some people with schizophrenia.



Diagnosis

No medical test can diagnose schizophrenia. The diagnosis should be made by a psychiatrist. A psychiatrist is a health care provider who specializes in mental, emotional and behavioral disorders.

A complete social and medical history is needed to diagnose schizophrenia. The psychiatrist may ask about symptoms and family history. They may also interview family members or friends about any changes in behavior.

Blood tests and brain images may be done. This can help to make sure the symptoms are not caused by other diseases.

Treatment

There is no cure for schizophrenia. But treatment can help control symptoms. With treatment, many people lead satisfying lives.

Antipsychotic medicines can relieve many of the symptoms of schizophrenia. These medicines work by changing the balance of chemicals in the brain. It can take several tries before you find the medication that works best.



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Antipsychotic medicines can cause serious side effects, including:

- Blurry vision.
- Dizziness.
- Fast heartbeat.
- Feeling restless.
- Menstrual problems.

Antipsychotic medicines can also cause:

- Sensitivity to the sun.
- Skin rashes.
- Stiffness.
- Uncontrollable body movements.
- Weight gain.

Often these side effects go away after a few days. Others take more time. You should always tell your health care provider about any side effects you experience.

Some people may have a relapse, meaning their symptoms come back or get worse. Usually, relapses happen when people stop taking their medication. Relapses can also happen when medications are not taken regularly, or as scheduled.

Some people stop taking the medication because they feel better or they may feel they don't need it anymore. But no one should stop taking an antipsychotic medication without talking to his or her health care provider.



Follow your health care provider's instructions about how to stop your medications. Health care providers usually ask that you gradually taper off your medication. Never stop your medication suddenly.

Psychosocial treatments can help people with schizophrenia who are already stabilized on antipsychotic medication. Psychosocial treatments help these patients deal with the everyday challenges of the illness, such as difficulty with communication, self-care, work and forming and keeping relationships.

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A therapist can help patients better understand and adjust to living with schizophrenia. The therapist can provide education about the disorder, common symptoms or problems patients may experience, and the importance of staying on medications.

Illness management skills are one example of psychosocial treatments. This can help a person with schizophrenia learn how to manage their illness.

Illness management skills include:

- Family education.
- Rehabilitation.
- Self-help groups.
- Treatment for drug and alcohol problems.



Family education focuses on ways to help the whole family learn how to cope with the illness from day to day.

Rehabilitation may be useful in helping a person with schizophrenia find a job. It also teaches everyday living skills.

Self help groups provide support from other people with schizophrenia and their families. Therapy is another psychosocial treatment that may help some manage their symptoms.



Using drugs and alcohol to cope with the illness are problems for some people with schizophrenia. They are less likely to follow a treatment plan when using drugs or alcohol.

Using drugs and alcohol can make medicines less effective. Smoking cigarettes can also make antipsychotic medicines less helpful. People with schizophrenia may need medical help to quit smoking because it can make symptoms worse.

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