

Schizophrenia

What is schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a serious mental illness. People with this illness have disturbed and disorganized thinking, language, and behavior. They may see, hear, or feel things that aren't really there. Sometimes the speech of a person with schizophrenia makes no sense. Schizophrenia usually causes serious problems in day-to-day living.

The term schizophrenia means "split mind." Those who have it seem to have normal mental function in some areas but are very disturbed in others. (For example, a person may talk in bizarre ways but be able to do math.) Schizophrenia should not be confused with multiple personality disorder (now called dissociative identity disorder), in which a person has at least two, and perhaps many, distinct personalities.

About 1% of people have schizophrenia in their lifetimes. It affects men and women equally.

How does it occur?

There are many theories about the cause of schizophrenia. The genes a person inherits from his or her parents may be partly responsible. Stress can trigger episodes. Some scientists believe that something might happen before birth, such as a viral infection in the womb, that causes schizophrenia decades later.

Special scans, such as PET (positron-emission tomography) and MRI (magnetic resonance imaging), have been used to look at the brains of people with this illness. These pictures show that some parts of the brain do not work normally in people with schizophrenia.

Lab studies have shown that nerve cells in some parts of the brains of schizophrenics may be misaligned or damaged. Another possible cause is that chemicals carrying signals between nerve cells may be out of balance.

Family problems or poor parenting does **not** cause schizophrenia. However, stress does appear to make things worse for people with this illness.

What are the symptoms?

No single symptom defines this illness. It is identified by a collection of symptoms:

- having hallucinations, which means hearing voices that no one else can hear, seeing people or objects that are not there, or feeling something that is not there
- having delusions, which means false beliefs; for example, you might believe there is a plot against you by powerful people, or you might think that you have special powers no one else has
- dressing unsuitably, like wearing winter gloves in summer
- neglecting personal hygiene and grooming, such as not bathing or combing your hair
- withdrawing from social contact and not speaking to anyone
- having other people often tell you that they cannot follow or understand what you are saying
- having trouble keeping your thoughts straight
- growing very distrustful of people without good reason

Schizophrenia

- having very bland or blunted emotions
- not being able to work with or relate to other people
- giving up on achieving anything.

People with schizophrenia tend to withdraw and to lack motivation and energy, which are called negative symptoms of the illness. Disruptive behavior, hearing voices, and having delusional thoughts are positive symptoms.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask about your symptoms. He or she will make sure that a medical problem or mind-altering drugs, such as LSD or cocaine, are not causing your symptoms.

There are several types of schizophrenia. The kinds of thoughts you have and the ways you act determine the type you have. The treatment is similar for all types of schizophrenia, however.

How is it treated?

Medications are the most important part of the treatment. Many medications are available that can make a big difference in your life. These medicines can cause some side effects, but you and your health care provider will watch for them closely.

It is very important to take your medication even when you are feeling and thinking well. Without the medicine you are very likely to have a relapse. It will be up to you, your family, and your health care provider to decide if you can do without medication.

Schizophrenia changes the way you relate to others and the way you think about everyday activities. Therefore, 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.

What can I do to help myself?

- Understand that although this may be a lifelong illness, a lot of research is being done to develop better ways to treat schizophrenia. Treatment for this illness can greatly improve your quality of life.
- Apply for assistance. The federal government may provide financial support and medical treatment to people disabled by schizophrenia.
- Stay away from drugs and alcohol. They can make this illness worse.
- Learn about schizophrenia and what signs and symptoms may mean it is getting worse. If you think your schizophrenia is getting worse, talk with your health care provider or therapist about what is happening.
- 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.
- Contact organizations like the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) and the National Mental Health Association (NMHA). They can provide information, education, and access to support groups.
 - NAMI's toll-free number is 1-800-950-NAMI. Its Web site address is <http://www.nami.org>.

Schizophrenia

- NMHA's toll-free Information Center number is 1-800-969-NMHA. Its Web site address is <http://www.NMHA.org>.

Written by Naakesh Dewan, M.D.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.