

Managing Schizophrenia

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What is schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is an illness that can affect your ability to think clearly, manage your emotions, and interact with others. It affects each person differently.

The way other people react to schizophrenia can make a difference in how schizophrenia affects you. It can make it easier or harder for you to cope with the illness.

Most people who have schizophrenia:

- Hear and sometimes see things that aren't there (hallucinations).
- Often believe some things that aren't true (delusions).
- May think that some people are trying to harm them (paranoia).

With treatment, they may come to understand that these experiences aren't real but are a problem with how their brains work.

There are several types of schizophrenia. The most common is paranoid schizophrenia, which causes people to have frightening thoughts, believe that people or forces are trying to harm them, and hear voices. Some people think that schizophrenia is the same as a "split personality" (dissociative identity disorder), but that is a different mental health problem.

Living with schizophrenia can cause many challenges. It's a difficult disease. It changes your life and the lives of your family. But you can live a full and meaningful life if:

- You are willing to work at helping yourself.
- You get professional help.
- You have the support and understanding of your family.

What causes schizophrenia?

Experts don't know what causes schizophrenia. It may have different causes for different people.

- In some people, brain chemistry and brain structure aren't normal.
- Family history may play a role.
- Problems that harm a baby's brain during pregnancy may help cause it.

It is **not** caused by anything you did, by personal weakness, or by the way your parents raised you.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of schizophrenia include:

- **Negative symptoms.** "Negative" doesn't mean "bad." Negative symptoms are things that are "lost" from your personality or how you experience life. You may:
 - Not care about things.
 - Have no interest or drive to do things.
 - Not take care of yourself, such as not bathing or not eating regularly.
 - Find it hard to say how you feel.
 - Become angry with strangers for no reason and react to others in other harmful ways.
- **Positive symptoms.** "Positive" doesn't mean "good." Positive symptoms are things "added" or "new" to your personality or how you experience life. They include:
 - Hallucinations.

- Delusions.
- Thoughts and speech that are confusing.
- **Cognitive symptoms.** These symptoms have to do with how you think. They often aren't obvious to you or others. They can include:
 - Memory loss.
 - Not being able to understand things well enough to make decisions.
 - Having trouble talking clearly to others.

Symptoms usually start when you are a teen or a young adult, but they may start later in life. They may appear suddenly or may develop slowly. You may not be aware of your symptoms.

Negative symptoms usually appear first. They may be hard to recognize as schizophrenia, because they are similar to symptoms of other problems, such as depression. Positive symptoms can start days, months, or years after the negative symptoms.

Early signs of schizophrenia may include doing worse in school, thinking that people are trying to harm you, or having changes in your personality, such as not wanting to see people.

These signs don't mean you have schizophrenia. But if you have them, see a doctor.

How is schizophrenia diagnosed?

Your doctor will ask you questions about your health and about any odd experiences you may have had, such as hearing voices or having confusing thoughts. You will have a physical exam. Your doctor also may suggest tests, such as blood tests or imaging tests, to see if your symptoms may be caused by another health problem.

How is it treated?

Medicines help your symptoms, and counseling and therapy help you change how you think about things and deal with the illness. Treatment may last a long time.

When you have your symptoms under control, you are in recovery. Recovery usually is a lifelong process. In the recovery process, you learn to cope with your symptoms and challenges, find and meet your goals, and get the support you need. Your recovery depends upon a partnership between you, your doctors, and others who are important in your life.

People who have schizophrenia often stop treatment. This may be because they don't understand that they have an illness or because the medicines cause side effects. When treatment stops, symptoms usually come back (relapse) or get worse. A relapse might happen right after treatment is stopped or months later. A later relapse makes it hard to see that stopping the medicine was the cause. During a relapse, some people who have schizophrenia may need to spend time in a hospital.

How can family and friends help?

Having schizophrenia can be a scary experience, and knowing that someone you love has this illness changes your life. Show love, and learn as much as you can about the illness. Understand that the behavior you may see is caused by the illness and is not the person you love.

If you think that someone you love has schizophrenia, help that person get to a doctor. The sooner the illness is diagnosed and the person begins treatment, the more successful treatment and recovery may be.

You can help by talking to your loved one and helping him or her continue treatment. You also can help your loved one deal with fear and other feelings about the illness and with the negative attitudes that some people have toward schizophrenia.

Additional Information

National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) (800) 467-3589
<http://www.namitn.org/questions.htm> (Tennessee chapter of NAMI)
<http://www.psych.org> (American Psychiatric Association)
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov> (National Institute of Mental Health)
 National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800) 273-8255
 Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network www.tspn.org (615) 297-1077