

Schizophrenia

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Schizophrenia is a severe, long-lasting (chronic) brain disease. It affects major areas of everyday life and can get in the way of your ability to take care of yourself.

Schizophrenia makes it hard to tell the difference between what is real and what is unreal. You have trouble thinking clearly, speaking (choosing your words, making sentences), managing emotions and relating with others. You may hear voices or have thoughts that other people are trying to read your mind, control your thoughts or cause you harm.

Schizophrenia occurs equally among men and women. Men are usually affected in their late teens or early 20s. Women are usually affected in their 20s to early 30s. Although rare, young children older than age 5 or adults (over age 40) can develop schizophrenia.

Medicines or other treatments can help control and reduce the symptoms, but this disease needs lifelong treatment.

Symptoms

Schizophrenia often starts with changes in behavior. It can develop slowly over time. If schizophrenia comes on quickly and severely, it is known as acute.

Psychosis — being unable to tell what is real and what is not real — is a common condition. Symptoms include:

- **hallucinations:** feeling things or hearing voices that do not really exist. Hearing voices is the most common type of hallucination. These voices may give orders, carry on conversations or give warning of danger.
- **delusions:** having false beliefs of being watched, harassed or targeted (paranoia). You may also have delusions of grandeur. These are false beliefs of power or fame, such as being a president or a religious leader. Delusions may cause you to think people on TV are broadcasting their thoughts to others.

Different behaviors may occur with schizophrenia. You may seem distant or deep in thought, anxious, alert or move around a lot. Or, you may sit motionless and not move for hours.

Other symptoms of schizophrenia can include:

- **thought disorder:** having rapid thoughts and being unable to think clearly. You can have problems concentrating and focusing your attention. You can jump from topic to topic and speak so quickly you don't seem to make sense.
- **withdrawal:** wanting to be left alone.

Suicide rates among people with schizophrenia are higher than among the general public. Some people only have one psychotic episode (hallucinations, delusions or both) while others may have many.

Causes

Schizophrenia is not a split personality disorder (a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde switch in character). Schizophrenia is a complex disease of the brain. It may be caused by:

- a disorder in development of the brain
- a genetic link. Schizophrenia tends to run in families.

Diagnosis

Your health care provider must first rule out other illnesses or medical problems (conditions). He or she may:

- take your medical history
- do a physical exam
- take blood or other lab tests.

Treatments

Schizophrenia can be managed. There are treatments that can control or reduce symptoms.

■ Antipsychotic medicines:

Medicines can help reduce many of the symptoms such as hallucinations and delusions. Medicines do not cause addictive behavior but some have serious side effects that make them hard to take. Side effects include drowsiness, restlessness, muscle spasms and irregular heartbeats. Your health care provider will choose the right medicine and schedule for you.

■ Psychotherapy:

Working with a mental health provider can help you explore your thoughts, feelings or relationships. Supportive therapy can help you sort out the real world from the unreal world.

■ Rehabilitation self-help groups or day programs:

Groups for families dealing with schizophrenia can provide support and help. Rehabilitation can help people with schizophrenia improve skills around work and relationships.

Treatment can let you work, enjoy friends and live an independent, fulfilling life. Like any other long-term disease such as diabetes or heart disease, schizophrenia needs long-term treatment.

Talk with your health care provider about which treatment options are best for you.

**Information adapted from the
National Institute of Mental Health.**