

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a serious mental illness that affects how a person thinks, feels and behaves. Schizophrenia usually involves delusions, hallucinations, unusual physical behavior and disorganized thinking and speech. It is common for people with schizophrenia to have paranoid thoughts and hear voices. The symptoms of schizophrenia can make it difficult for the patient to participate in day-to-day activities and can be frightening, confusing, and isolating. Consistent treatment including medications, therapy and social support can be effective for people with schizophrenia and allow them to manage the disease and engage in school or work, achieve independence, and enjoy personal relationships.

It is important to recognize the symptoms of schizophrenia and get help as early as possible. Typically, people with schizophrenia are diagnosed between the ages of 16 and 30. According to the National Institute of Mental Health symptoms can differ from person to person, but they generally fall into three categories: psychotic, negative, and cognitive.

Psychotic symptoms include changes in the way a person thinks, acts and experiences the world. Psychotic symptoms include:

- *Hallucinations-When a person sees, hears, smells, tastes or feels things that are not actually there. Hearing voices is common for those with schizophrenia.

- *Delusions-When a person has strong beliefs that are not true and may seem irrational to others. They may be convinced they are in danger or that others are plotting against them.

- *Thought Disorders-When a person has thought patterns that are unusual or illogical. People with thought disorders may have trouble organizing, prioritizing, and defining their thoughts and speech.

- *Movement Disorders-When a person exhibits abnormal body movements repeatedly. This may include tics, spasms, and repetition of movements such as kicking or clapping.

Negative symptoms are reflected in loss of motivation, withdrawal from social interaction, difficulty showing emotions, and problems functioning normally. Negative symptoms include:

- *Speaking in a dull manner and showing little facial expression.

- *Avoiding social interaction and/or exhibiting awkwardness in interactions.

- *Having difficulty planning and completing activities or tasks.

- *Feeling low energy levels and lack of ambition. In extreme cases, an individual might stop moving or talking for a period of time, which is a rare condition called catatonia.

- *Inability to feel pleasure or satisfaction in everyday life.

Cognitive symptoms include issues with attention, concentration and memory. These symptoms make life very hard for patients because their inability to remember appointments, learn something new or follow and participate in a conversation make daily life very difficult.

Cognitive symptoms include.

- *Having issues making decisions due to an inability to process information.

*Inability to apply information to problem solve or accomplish a task after learning new information.

*Inability to focus or pay attention.

There are several factors which can contribute to an individual's risk for developing schizophrenia. These include:

*Genetics: Schizophrenia sometimes runs in families. Studies indicate many different genes may increase a person's chance of developing schizophrenia, but that no single gene causes the disorder by itself.

*Environment: Research suggests a combination of genetic factors and some aspects of a person's environment and experiences may contribute to the development of schizophrenia. The National Institute of Mental Health identifies these environmental factors: living in poverty, stressful or dangerous surroundings, exposure to viruses, and nutritional problems before birth.

*Brain Structure and Function: People with schizophrenia are more likely to have differences in the size of certain brain areas and in connection between brain areas. Some of these brain differences may develop before birth.

Treatments for schizophrenia focus on managing symptoms, improving daily functioning, and achieving goals such as completing education and pursuing a career. Antipsychotic medications can help make psychotic symptoms less intense and less frequent. These medications are usually taken daily. Some antipsychotic drugs are given by injection once or twice a month.

If a person does not experience an improvement in his/her symptoms, clozapine may be prescribed. Those who take clozapine must have regular blood tests to check for a potentially dangerous side effect that occurs in one to two per cent of patients. Many people taking antipsychotic drugs experience side effects like weight gain, dry mouth, restlessness and drowsiness when they begin taking the medications. It is important to report any side effects to a health care provider.

Psychosocial treatments help patients find solutions to everyday challenges and manage symptoms while attending school, working and forming relationships. These treatments are often used together with antipsychotic medication. Those who participate in regular psychosocial treatment are less likely to have symptoms recur or to be hospitalized. Examples of this kind of treatment include cognitive behavioral therapy, behavioral skills training, supported employment and cognitive remediation intervention.

Educational programs and support groups can help families and friends learn about symptoms of schizophrenia, treatment options, and strategies for helping loved ones with this illness. These programs can also help friends and family manage their distress, boost coping skills and strengthen their ability to provide support. The National Alliance on Mental Illness website has information about support groups and education.

