

## Definition

Schizophrenia is a severe brain disorder in which people interpret reality abnormally. Schizophrenia may result in some combination of hallucinations, delusions, and extremely disordered thinking and behavior.

Contrary to popular belief, schizophrenia isn't a split personality or multiple personality. The word "schizophrenia" does mean "split mind," but it refers to a disruption of the usual balance of emotions and thinking.

Schizophrenia is a chronic condition, requiring lifelong treatment.

## Symptoms

In men, schizophrenia symptoms typically start in the early to mid-20s. In women, symptoms typically begin in the late 20s. It's uncommon for children to be diagnosed with schizophrenia and rare for those older than 45.

Schizophrenia involves a range of problems with thinking (cognitive), behavior or emotions. Signs and symptoms may vary, but they reflect an impaired ability to function. Symptoms may include:

- **Delusions:** These are false beliefs that are not based on reality. For example, you're being harmed or harassed; certain gestures or comments are directed at you; you have exceptional ability or fame; another person is in love with you; a major catastrophe is about to occur; or your body is not functioning properly. Delusions occur in as many as 4 out of 5 people with schizophrenia.
- **Hallucinations:** These usually involve seeing or hearing things that don't exist. Yet for the person with schizophrenia, they have the full force and impact of a normal experience. Hallucinations can be in any of the senses, but hearing voices is the most common hallucination.
- **Disorganized thinking (speech):** Disorganized thinking is inferred from disorganized speech. Effective communication can be impaired, and answers to questions may be partially or completely unrelated. Rarely, speech may include putting together meaningless words that can't be understood, sometimes known as word salad.
- **Extremely disorganized or abnormal motor behavior:** This may show in a number of ways, ranging from childlike silliness to unpredictable agitation. Behavior is not focused on a goal, which makes it hard to perform tasks. Abnormal motor behavior can include resistance

to instructions, inappropriate and bizarre posture, a complete lack of response, or useless and excessive movement.

- **Negative symptoms:** This refers to reduced ability or lack of ability to function normally. For example, the person appears to lack emotion, such as not making eye contact, not changing facial expressions, speaking without inflection or monotone, or not adding hand or head movements that normally provide the emotional emphasis in speech. Also, the person may have a reduced ability to plan or carry out activities, such as decreased talking and neglect of personal hygiene, or have a loss of interest in everyday activities, social withdrawal or a lack of ability to experience pleasure.

### *Symptoms in teenagers*

Schizophrenia symptoms in teenagers are similar to those in adults, but the condition may be more difficult to recognize in this age group. This may be in part because some of the early symptoms of schizophrenia in teenagers are common for typical development during teen years, such as:

- Withdrawal from friends and family
- A drop in performance at school
- Trouble sleeping
- Irritability or depressed mood
- Lack of motivation

Compared with schizophrenia symptoms in adults, teens may be:

- Less likely to have delusions
- More likely to have visual hallucinations

### *When to see a doctor*

People with schizophrenia often lack awareness that their difficulties stem from a mental illness that requires medical attention. So, it often falls to family or friends to get them help.

## Causes

It's not known what causes schizophrenia, but researchers believe that a combination of genetics and environment contributes to development of the disorder.

Problems with certain naturally occurring brain chemicals, including neurotransmitters called dopamine and glutamate, also may contribute to schizophrenia. Neuroimaging studies show differences in the brain structure and central nervous

system of people with schizophrenia. While researchers aren't certain about the significance of these changes, they support evidence that schizophrenia is a brain disease.

## Risk factors

Although the precise cause of schizophrenia isn't known, certain factors seem to increase the risk of developing or triggering schizophrenia, including:

- Having a family history of schizophrenia
- Exposure to viruses, toxins or malnutrition while in the womb, particularly in the first and second trimesters
- Older age of the father

## Complications

- Increased immune system activation, such as from inflammation or autoimmune diseases
- Taking mind-altering (psychoactive or psychotropic) drugs during teen years and young adulthood.

Left untreated, schizophrenia can result in severe emotional, behavioral and health problems, as well as legal and financial problems that affect every area of life.

**Complications that schizophrenia may cause or be associated with include:**

- Suicide
- Any type of self-injury
- Anxiety and phobias
- Depression
- Abuse of alcohol, drugs or prescription medications
- Poverty
- Aggressive behavior, although it's uncommon and typically related to lack of treatment, substance misuse or a history of violence
- Homelessness

## Coping and support

- Family conflicts
- Inability to work or attend school
- Social isolation
- Health problems, including those associated with antipsychotic medications, smoking and poor lifestyle choices
- Being a victim of aggressive behavior

Coping with a mental disorder as serious as schizophrenia can be challenging, both for the person with the condition and for friends and family.

**Here are some ways to cope:**

- Learn about schizophrenia: Education about the condition can help motivate the person with the disease

to stick to the treatment plan. Education can help friends and family understand the condition and be more compassionate with the person who has it.

- Join a support group: Support groups for people with schizophrenia can help them reach out to others facing similar challenges. Support groups may also help family and friends cope.
- Stay focused on goals: Managing schizophrenia is an ongoing process. Keeping treatment goals in mind can help the person with schizophrenia stay motivated. Help your loved one remember to take responsibility for managing the illness and working toward goals.
- Learn relaxation and stress management: The person with schizophrenia and loved ones may benefit from stress-reduction techniques such as meditation, yoga or tai chi.

## Prevention

There's no sure way to prevent schizophrenia. However, early treatment may help get symptoms under control before serious complications develop and may help improve the long-term outlook.

Sticking with the treatment plan can help prevent relapses or worsening of schizophrenia symptoms. In addition, researchers hope that learning more about risk factors for schizophrenia may lead to earlier diagnosis and treatment.

*Sources: The Mayo Clinic*

## Contact us

Please feel free to contact your Aon Healthcare Consultant if you have any concerns. You may also contact the **Aon Resolution Centre on 0860 835 272 or e-mail: [arc@aon.co.za](mailto:arc@aon.co.za)** for further information.

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