



## **Schizophrenia**

**Definition:** Schizophrenia is a severe brain disorder in which the person interprets reality abnormally. 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 is a chronic condition that requires life-long treatment. The vast majority of individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia are not aggressive; they are more frequently victimized than the general population.

### **Symptoms:**

For a diagnosis, symptoms must have been present for six months and include at least one month of active symptoms.

Symptoms of schizophrenia include:

- Delusions
- Hallucinations
- Disorganized speech (incoherence)
- Disorganized or Catatonic behavior (withdrawn, mute, unusual posture)
- Negative symptoms (diminished emotional expression, poor eye contact, reduced body language, brief replies, inability to initiate and persist in goal-oriented activities, such as work or school)

At least 2 of the 5 symptoms must be present for at least one month and one of the symptoms must be either delusions, hallucinations or disorganized speech.

### **Causes:**

The exact cause of schizophrenia is still unknown, but research shows that it results from genetic and environmental factors. Scientists have shown that the brains of people diagnosed with the condition are different from those without the illness. Having a family history of the disease increases the risk. Specific genes have been identified that may influence the risk for developing schizophrenia. Scientists believe, however, that more than genes are involved. Environmental factors such as exposure to viruses, malnutrition before birth, or possibly early childhood trauma may interfere with gene development and lead to increased risk.

### **Treatment:**

The primary treatment for schizophrenia is medication. The medical management of schizophrenia often requires a combination of antipsychotic, antidepressant, and anti-anxiety medication. Unfortunately, compliance with a treatment regimen is one of the most difficult problems associated with the ongoing treatment of schizophrenia. People often stop taking their medications during periods throughout their life because the side effects may be difficult to tolerate.



Successful treatment of schizophrenia requires a lifelong program of medication and psychosocial support. Psychotherapy can help maintain the individual on their medication, learn needed social skills, and support the person's weekly goals and activities in their life. Group and family therapy, combined with medication, can help reduce relapse, decrease social isolation, and increase reality testing. If the individual finds appropriate treatment and sticks with it, a person with schizophrenia can lead a happy and successful life.

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