

What is Schizophrenia?

A Brief Review



Schizophrenia usually starts in adolescence or early twenties in males and in the late 20s and early 30s in some females. Symptoms vary greatly among different people. Schizophrenia affects about 1% of the world's population (60 million people affected around the world).

Although currently classified as a mental illness, schizophrenia is now scientifically accepted as a neurobiological brain illness.



Symptoms of schizophrenia may include hallucinations (seeing, hearing or smelling things that are not really there) and delusions (persistent false beliefs, such as that someone plans to harm them or the affected individual believes that others can read his mind or that the TV is talking about him). Some people experience social withdrawal, lack of motivation, inability to initiate actions, or neglect of hygiene, such as not showering. Cognitive impairment may include memory deficits and inability to plan or make decisions. Patients suffering from schizophrenia often do not realize they have an illness and resist being hospitalized or refuse medications that can reduce or eliminate their symptoms.



The media sometimes wrongly portrays people with schizophrenia as hard to relate to, dangerous, or weak. But what patients often experience is very different than what they thought schizophrenia actually is. Common myths of schizophrenia include the false belief that people with schizophrenia have multiple personalities, a split mind, a flawed personality, or a low IQ. Actually, the vast majority of persons with schizophrenia who take their medications regularly and do not abuse drugs are NOT dangerous. Statistically, people with schizophrenia are no more dangerous than the general population.

Schizophrenia is a medical condition that affects the brain and leads to unusual thoughts or behavior, and there should be no shame or stigma attached to it or its treatment. Schizophrenia is no one's fault, any more than asthma, an infection, hypertension, diabetes, arthritis, or cancer. Today, with medication and social support and rehabilitation, full recovery from schizophrenia is possible.

Anyone, including highly intelligent persons, any socioeconomic status, or race can develop schizophrenia. Like cancer, diabetes, autism, and other medical problems, it cannot be simply overcome by willpower.

Medications to treat schizophrenia are called "antipsychotics." Examples include Risperdal, Zyprexa, Seroquel, and Abilify. Some people with schizophrenia experience full recovery (i.e. no longer have symptoms or much lower symptoms) and may be able to return to school or work. A sizeable proportion will have at least partial recovery and may be able to function at some level in the community.

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