

It can take time to work out the specific medication that best responds to a person's needs.

Therapy can assist with behavioural symptoms, such as communication, self-care and building relationships. The illness usually develops in youths who have not yet developed sophisticated social skills or completed career training. Psychotherapy, self-help groups and family education can reduce some of the hurdles that schizophrenia puts in front of young people.

## **SUPPORT AND UNDERSTANDING ARE VITAL**

Knowledge is an essential coping device – for parents, siblings and friends. You can learn how to minimize stressful situations for the person with schizophrenia and how to communicate more effectively.

Parents should participate in treatment – attending doctor's visits, for instance – and understand the medication prescribed, its potential benefits and side effects.

Just as the person with schizophrenia needs your understanding and support, so do the other members of the family.

## **WHERE TO GO FOR MORE INFORMATION**

For further information, contact a community organization like the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) to find out about support and resources in your community.

The Canadian Mental Health Association is a nation-wide, voluntary organization that promotes the mental health of all and supports the resilience and recovery of people experiencing mental illness. CMHA accomplishes this mission through advocacy, education, research and service.

Visit the CMHA website at [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca) today.

# **SCHIZOPHRENIA**



## **MENTALLY HEALTHY PEOPLE IN A HEALTHY SOCIETY**



Schizophrenia is a mystery, a puzzle with missing pieces. This complex biochemical brain disorder affects a person's ability to determine what is reality and what is not. It is as though the brain sends perceptions along the wrong path, leading to the wrong conclusion. People with schizophrenia are affected by delusions (fixed false beliefs that can be terrifying to the person experiencing them), hallucinations (sensory experiences, such as hearing voices talking about them when there is no one there), social withdrawal and disturbed thinking.

In Canada, schizophrenia affects one in every 100 people. The effects of schizophrenia can be debilitating. It can deprive people of their ability to function in the workplace and with their family. Around 40% of people with schizophrenia attempt suicide and 10-15% succeed. It is estimated that this illness costs Canadian society up to \$4 billion annually.

The puzzle of schizophrenia has yet to be solved, but new research and improved treatments are providing rays of hope for people with this illness.

## WHAT CAUSES SCHIZOPHRENIA

We do not know what causes schizophrenia. It may be several illnesses that appear to be one. It is believed that the symptoms result from a biochemical imbalance in the brain. Neurotransmitters, chemicals which carry communication between nerve cells in the brain, are thought to be a factor in the development of schizophrenia. Recent research suggests that the illness may stem from mis-aligned neuronal development in the fetal brain.

There is evidence that genes are involved in causing schizophrenia. Studies show that the risk of having schizophrenia is greater if a family member is affected.

Stress, drugs and alcohol do not cause schizophrenia, but they can trigger or worsen symptoms.

## WHO DOES IT AFFECT?

Schizophrenia appears in men, women and children of every race, culture and social class. It is known as "youth's great disabler" because it usually strikes between the ages of 15 and 25. Schizophrenia tends to manifest earlier in males. It can appear in children as young as five, but these cases are rare.

Schizophrenia occurs in 1% of the population, but the occurrence rises to 10-15% when a sibling or one parent has schizophrenia. When both parents have schizophrenia, the risk is approximately 40-50%.

## SYMPTOMS

The symptoms of schizophrenia can develop gradually or with suddenness. Early diagnosis is difficult because the first warning signs are frequently confused with typical adolescent behaviour.

With onset, individuals undergo changes in their personality, from outgoing to withdrawn. They find it difficult to think clearly and logically. They see, hear, smell and feel sensations which are not real. Their symptoms are frightening and people often try to keep them secret, which adds to the tremendous pressure they are already feeling.

Psychosis is integral to schizophrenia. This refers to a state of mental impairment accompanied by hallucinations and/or delusions. Other symptoms, such as social withdrawal, unusual speech or behaviour, may occur before, during and after a psychotic episode.

Symptoms are classified into positive and negative categories.

## Positive Symptoms

- Hallucinations: hearing voices or seeing visions that are not there. Usually, the voices are derogatory to the person; sometimes they command the individual to do harmful things.
- Delusions: beliefs that are held only by the person with schizophrenia. This may include the frightening belief that strangers are monitoring you or following you, or that your thoughts are being broadcast to or controlled by others.
- Thought disorder: the inability to organize thoughts and ideas, which can result in incoherent speech and inappropriate emotional responses.

## Negative Symptoms

- Lack of motivation, apathy
- Blunted feelings or blunted affect
- Depression

## TREATMENT

While schizophrenia is not curable, treatment is available to reduce symptoms and help people function more effectively.

Serious psychotic episodes may require hospitalization, particularly the first episodes. Over time and with an effective medication strategy, the illness can stabilize in many people, increasing the likelihood of adaptation and recovery.

Antipsychotic drugs are useful in treating some symptoms of schizophrenia, such as hallucinations and delusions. They are less effective with symptoms like reduced motivation and emotional expressiveness. In people who have gone through an acute psychotic episode, medication reduces the risk of future episodes, but it must be taken regularly. Side effects can affect an individual's commitment to medication.