

Schizophrenia



Schizophrenia is a serious brain illness. People who have it may hear voices that aren't there. They may think other people are trying to hurt them. Sometimes they don't make sense when they talk. The disorder makes it hard for them to keep a job or take care of themselves.

Causes

Anyone can develop schizophrenia. It affects men and women equally in all ethnic groups. Teens can also develop schizophrenia. In rare cases, children have the illness too.

When does it start?

Symptoms of schizophrenia usually start between ages 16 and 30. Men often develop symptoms at a younger age than women. People usually do not get schizophrenia after age 45.

Several factors may contribute to schizophrenia, including:

- Genes, because the illness runs in families
- The environment, such as viruses and nutrition problems before birth
- Different brain structure and brain chemistry.

Scientists have learned a lot about schizophrenia. They are identifying genes and parts of the brain that may play a role in the illness. Some experts think the illness begins before birth but doesn't show up until years later. With more study, researchers may be able to predict who will develop schizophrenia.

Symptoms

Symptoms of schizophrenia usually start between ages 16 and 30. Men often develop symptoms at a younger age than women. People usually do not get schizophrenia after age 45. There are three types of symptoms:

- Psychotic symptoms distort a person's thinking. These include hallucinations (hearing or seeing things that are not there), delusions (beliefs that are not true), trouble organizing thoughts, and strange movements.
- "Negative" symptoms make it difficult to show emotions and to function normally. A person may seem depressed and withdrawn.
- Cognitive symptoms affect the thought process. These include trouble using information, making decisions, and paying attention.

No one is sure what causes schizophrenia. Your genes, environment, and brain chemistry may play a role.

Schizophrenia symptoms range from mild to severe. There are three main types of symptoms.

1. Positive symptoms refer to a distortion of a person's normal thinking and functioning. They are "psychotic" behaviors. People with these symptoms are sometimes unable to tell what's real from what is imagined. Positive symptoms include:

- Hallucinations: when a person sees, hears, smells, or feels things that no one else can. "Hearing voices" is common for people with schizophrenia. People who hear voices may hear them for a long time before family or friends notice a problem.

- Delusions: when a person believes things that are not true. For example, a person may believe that people on the radio and television are talking directly to him or her. Sometimes people believe that they are in danger-that other people are trying to hurt them.

- Thought disorders: ways of thinking that are not usual or helpful. People with thought disorders may have trouble organizing their thoughts. Sometimes a person will stop talking in the middle of a thought. And some people make up words that have no meaning.

- Movement disorders: may appear as agitated body movements. A person with a movement disorder may repeat certain motions over and over. In the other extreme, a person may stop moving or talking for a while, a rare condition called "catatonia."

2. Negative symptoms refer to difficulty showing emotions or functioning normally. When a person with schizophrenia has negative symptoms, it may look like depression. People with negative symptoms may:

- Talk in a dull voice

- Show no facial expression, like a smile or frown

- Have trouble having fun

- Have trouble planning and sticking with an activity, like grocery shopping

- Talk very little to other people, even when they need to.

3. Cognitive symptoms are not easy to see, but they can make it hard for people to have a job or take care of themselves. Cognitive symptoms include:

Diagnosis

Several factors may contribute to schizophrenia, including:

- Genes, because the illness runs in families

- The environment, such as viruses and nutrition problems before birth

- Different brain structure and brain chemistry.

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Treatment

There is no cure. Medicine can help control many of the symptoms. You may need to try different medicines to see which works best. You should stay on your medicine for as long as your doctor recommends. Additional treatments can help you deal with your illness from day to day. These include therapy, family education, rehabilitation, and skills training.

How can I help someone I know with schizophrenia?

Families are usually the caregivers for people with schizophrenia. Family members can help their loved one get treatment. They can also learn how to help their loved one do his or her best in everyday life.

Caring for and supporting a family member with schizophrenia can be hard. People with the disorder may not want treatment. They may stop taking their medication. If this happens, you may need help from the police or a hospital. Doctors at the emergency room can check your loved one and decide whether he or she needs professional help.

It's important to respect a person with schizophrenia. But you do not have to allow dangerous behavior. Stay in touch with your loved one's doctors. Talk to them about how to help your family member through good and bad times.

Check to see if there are any support groups in your area. Talking to others who care for people with schizophrenia may help your whole family.

References

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