

Schizophrenia

WHAT IS SCHIZOPHRENIA ?

Schizophrenia is a disease of the brain that affects one out of a hundred people in the world.

It affects people in all cultures and in all countries. It usually strikes in the late teenage and early adult years, most commonly between 15 and 25 years of age in men and between 25 and 35 years in women.

What Schizophrenia Is Not

Schizophrenia has nothing to do with "split personality" or "multiple personality."

What Schizophrenia Is

Schizophrenia is a form of psychotic disorder or psychosis, meaning it is a disorder that causes people to have difficulty interpreting reality.

Individuals develop a marked change in their thinking, perceptions, and behaviour as evidenced by the presence of a combination of the following symptoms: hallucinations, delusions or false beliefs, disorganized speech, disorganized behaviour, apathy, and social withdrawal.

Some people may have only one or two of these symptoms, while others may have many.

By definition, schizophrenia is only diagnosed if these symptoms last for at least six months and are associated with a significant decline in the person's ability to care for themselves or to function in social and work situations.

What Causes Schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is believed to occur as a result of a disturbance in the development of the brain.

It is currently thought that this most likely occurs as a result of genetic factors, although environmental factors may play a role.

As is the case for many other medical illnesses, the illness appears to occur many years after the genetic factors and underlying developmental changes have been expressed.

Schizophrenia is not caused by psychological conflicts or stress or drug use. Sometimes these factors seem to be important in precipitating an acute episode of illness, but this is only believed to occur in individuals who are otherwise predisposed to develop schizophrenia. Recent studies have suggested the use of illicit drugs may increase the chance of someone with a genetic vulnerability to develop schizophrenia.

Can Schizophrenia Be Treated?

Medications that were discovered in the 1950s have been proven to be effective for many of the symptoms of schizophrenia. Some people will have complete resolution of all their symptoms with their use.

Hallucinations, paranoia, and delusions often improve over a number of weeks.

The social withdrawal and apathy will also improve but sometimes to a lesser extent than these other symptoms.

Talking therapies are also important in helping people to adjust to their illness. But the symptoms of schizophrenia do not respond to talking therapies by themselves.

Medications are necessary to resolve the symptoms of schizophrenia.

Medications available to date are not perfect, however. They have significant side effects, some of which can be long-lasting. However, these medications allow many people with schizophrenia to have productive lives in the community.

Once the symptoms of schizophrenia are improved with medications, it is almost always the case that medications will be needed for a long period of time as the risk of becoming ill again after going off of medications is extremely high.

What Happens to People with Schizophrenia?

Prior to the introduction of antipsychotic medication for schizophrenia, it was presumed that schizophrenia led to a deteriorating course that ultimately ended in chronic hospitalization.

Thankfully, this is no longer the case.

Roughly half of those with schizophrenia will do relatively well in the long term. Some will have a full recovery while others will have persisting difficulties of a moderate nature.

However, about half of those who develop schizophrenia will have more severe persisting difficulties, and their disability may be severe.

What More Do We Need to Know?

Schizophrenia is a very complex disease. The search for precise causes and a cure for schizophrenia have been elusive. As more is learned about the brain and genetics, the opportunity for a better understanding of schizophrenia is now here.

How Big a Problem Is Schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia has a devastating impact on those who suffer from it, and on their family and friends.

Ten per cent of people who develop schizophrenia will commit suicide.

Canada currently spends about \$4 billion a year to support people with schizophrenia, in and out of hospital.

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