Understanding Schizophrenia: A Guide to Help You Take Control

Models are used for illustrative purposes only and do not reflect actual patients.
What is schizophrenia?

- Schizophrenia is an illness that affects the way you think, behave, and experience things.
- Schizophrenia is not something to be ashamed of.
- Schizophrenia affects 1 in 100 people.
- Treatment can help improve symptoms.

Changes in the brain seem to play an important role in schizophrenia. Credit: Dr Monty Buchsbaum, Peter Arnold Inc./Science Photo Library. PET scan.
What is schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is an illness that affects the way you think, behave, and experience things

A person with schizophrenia may have several different kinds of symptoms. The person may hear or see things that are not real. These are called hallucinations. The person may believe things that are not true. These are known as delusions. Hallucinations and delusions are examples of “positive symptoms.” “Negative symptoms” are those that cause a loss of normal feelings. The person may lack emotion or energy. He or she may have problems enjoying people's company, or enjoying life in general.

Schizophrenia is not something to be ashamed of

Schizophrenia is an illness, just like diabetes and high blood pressure. No one knows exactly what causes it. Scientists have linked schizophrenia to abnormal levels of certain chemicals in the brain. It tends to run in families. Your environment also may play a role. Therefore, things that happen to you after birth may increase your risk. Having schizophrenia does not mean you are crazy. It also does not mean you have a split personality.

Schizophrenia affects 1 in 100 people

About 1 in every 100 people in America has this illness. It affects both men and women. It also affects all races of people throughout the world. People usually start having symptoms in early adulthood. Symptoms tend to start earlier in men. Women may first have symptoms in their late 20s and early 30s.

Treatment can help improve symptoms

One important part of treatment for schizophrenia is the use of medicines called antipsychotics. The word psychotic may sound scary. It means you may have trouble figuring out what is real and what is not. This is part of your illness, and antipsychotic medicines can help. For many people, taking medicine goes along with other supportive therapy. Therapy can include seeing a counselor or joining a support group. It is important to take your medicine as prescribed. Trying to meet daily living goals is just as important. Goals may include going to work or having steady contact with loved ones.
Taking control of symptoms

- The first step is accepting that you need help
- Medicine, therapy, and support are all important
- Your health care provider will work with you to choose the right medicine
- Even a helpful medicine may cause unwanted effects (side effects)

Chemicals in the brain that help communication between neurons are called neurotransmitters and are thought to play a role in schizophrenia. Two of the important neurotransmitters in the brain are dopamine and serotonin.

Taking control of symptoms

The first step is accepting that you need help

Schizophrenia affects your brain. It may affect your ability to see that you have the illness. You may not realize that some things you hear or think are caused by the illness. Your health care provider can help you understand your symptoms. Your family and close friends can too.

Medicine, therapy, and support are all important

There is no known cure for schizophrenia. Medicine is important, but it is just one part of treating schizophrenia. Medicine should be used along with some form of therapy or support. Your health care provider can explain the many types of therapy and support that are available. Other people with this illness may have helpful information for you.

Your health care provider will work with you to choose the right medicine

Many medicines can help treat your symptoms. Medicines may work differently for different people. Your health care provider will work with you to choose a medicine that is right for you. You and your loved ones should tell your health care provider about any past treatments that you have taken for schizophrenia. Always talk to your health care provider if you have questions.

Even a helpful medicine may cause unwanted effects

Even a medicine that is helping your symptoms can have unwanted effects, known as side effects. Your health care provider will work with you to find a medicine that is best for you.
Staying on track during treatment

- Communicate with others
- Take your medicine as prescribed
- Speak up if your medicine is not working
- Maintain a daily routine
- Treat your body well
- Use the resources available to you
Staying on track during treatment

Communicate with others
You may not want to talk about your illness. However, talking can help you share your experiences with a health care provider, loved ones, or a support group. This is especially true if you have a sudden change in thoughts or mood. If you have thoughts of hurting yourself, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255, or call 911.

Take your medicine as prescribed
Taking your medicine should be part of your daily routine. To help you remember to take your medicine, you should try to take it at the same time every day. You can also use a journal or calendar to keep track.

Speak up if your medicine is not working
Tell your health care provider if your medicine is not working well. Also report unwanted effects, also known as side effects, to your health care provider. You and your health care provider may need to make changes to your treatment. You have options, so share your questions and concerns. Never stop taking your medicine without speaking to your health care provider first.

Maintain a daily routine
It is important that your days have structure. This can help you stay positive and involved with other people. It also may help reduce the amount of stress you may feel. If you find you cannot keep up with your daily routine, get help from a health care provider or from family and friends. Some support groups also can help you with daily needs.

Treat your body well
Help your body by eating right and exercising. Some people with schizophrenia may also have problems with smoking, alcohol, or other drugs. These substances affect the chemicals in the brain and can make your health worse. Let your health care provider know if you have questions or need help for these problems.

Use the resources available to you
Many people and groups can help you with your illness. Some also can help you manage your life. Ask your health care provider what resources he or she recommends. Reach out for all the help you need. You do not have to cope with this alone!

A to-do list can remind you of important daily tasks.
Reaching out for more support

- Mental Health America
- National Alliance on Mental Illness
- National Institute of Mental Health
- Network of Care
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

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Reaching out for more support

Many groups offer support to people with schizophrenia. There are several resources available for caregivers. Here is a list of some of those resources.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>More facts about schizophrenia</th>
<th>List of local support groups and other services</th>
<th>Help with financial matters</th>
<th>Support for caregivers</th>
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<tbody>
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<tr>
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Note: Groups may provide services not indicated here. Services may change over time.

Notes:

Other important phone numbers:
Your health care provider:_________________________ Your caregiver:_________________________
In case of a crisis, call:_________________________
People with this illness may have thoughts of hurting themselves, including committing suicide. If you become aware of this, call 911. You may also get help from the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255.
Taking care of someone with schizophrenia

- Try to remain understanding
- Prepare to take an active role
- Be ready to handle a crisis
- Learn as much as you can
- Connect with other caregivers
Taking care of someone with schizophrenia

This illness can be hard on loved ones. You are not alone. The information provided here may help you care for someone with schizophrenia.

Try to remain understanding
People with schizophrenia may insist that what they are hearing, seeing, or thinking is real. Arguing will not help. Stay neutral and do not fight about it. It is okay to say that you do not hear, see, or believe the things that they do. Always remember that a person with this illness cannot simply be talked out of it.

Prepare to take an active role
People with schizophrenia may need help with basic tasks of living. These can include dressing, eating, and managing money. They may need help remembering doctor appointments and taking their medicines. They also may need help finding a place to live, getting a job, or applying for assistance. Use all resources to educate yourself and learn how best to help your loved one. Your support can be very important. When setbacks do happen, it is important not to blame yourself.

Be ready to handle a crisis
Symptoms may get worse suddenly. This can happen even in people taking their medicine. Watch for signs that your loved one’s illness is getting worse. Look for an increase in symptoms like hearing things, having strange thoughts, and feeling depressed. Your loved one may withdraw from you more. Learn all about the symptoms so you can notice them right away. Make an agreement with your loved one about what to do when symptoms get worse. Going to the hospital may sometimes be the best option. When the timing is right, consider talking to your loved one about an advance directive. This document can let you make medical decisions if your loved one cannot. Ask a health care provider for more information. People with this illness may discuss harming themselves. Get help right away in this situation. Take the person to a hospital, call their health care provider, or call 911. You may also call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800-273-8255.

Learn as much as you can
Since caregivers play a very important role, you should learn as much as you can. Talk to your loved one’s health care provider. Read about schizophrenia and also about how to cope with it. The more you know, the more you can help, and the easier it may be for you as well. Look into support programs. These programs can do more than teach you about the illness. They can help you support your loved one. They can help you tap into useful services. They can also help you share your feelings and experiences.

Connect with other caregivers
Speaking with other caregivers can be very helpful. These people have been there and can give you perspective. They may be able to help you during difficult days or situations. See the Support section for information on support groups. You can also read books and watch movies about schizophrenia. Caregivers need help too. Do not hesitate to ask for it!