

Schizophrenia: Symptoms and Treatments

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INTRODUCTION

Schizophrenia is a severe mental illness that affects a person's thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. People suffering from schizophrenia may appear to have lost touch with reality, causing significant distress for the individual, their family members, and friends. Schizophrenia symptoms can be persistent and disabling if left untreated. Effective treatments, on the other hand, are available. Treatment, when provided in a timely, coordinated, and sustained manner, can assist affected individuals in engaging in school or work, achieving independence, and enjoying personal relationships.

SYMPTOMS

Schizophrenia is typically diagnosed between the late teen years and the early thirties, and it manifests earlier in men (late adolescence – early twenties) than in women (early twenties – early thirties). A diagnosis of schizophrenia is frequently made following the first episode of psychosis, when people first exhibit symptoms of schizophrenia. Gradual changes in thinking, mood, and social functioning are common before the first episode of psychosis, which typically begins in adolescence. Schizophrenia can appear in younger children, but it is uncommon before late adolescence.

Schizophrenia symptoms are generally classified into three types:

Psychotic symptoms

It include altered perceptions (for example, changes in vision, hearing, smell, touch, and taste), abnormal thinking, and strange behaviours. People suffering from psychotic symptoms may lose their shared sense of reality and have distorted perceptions of themselves and the world. Individuals commonly experience the following symptoms:

- Hearing voices or seeing things that aren't there are examples of hallucinations.
- Delusions are strongly held beliefs that are not supported by objective facts (for example, paranoia - irrational fears that others are "out to get you," or believing that the television, radio, or internet are broadcasting special messages that require a response)
- Thought disorder is characterised by unusual thinking or disorganised speech

Negative symptoms

Loss of motivation, disinterest or lack of enjoyment in daily activities, social withdrawal, difficulty expressing emotions, and difficulty functioning normally are all negative symptoms. Individuals, in particular, typically have

- Low motivation and difficulty planning, starting, and maintaining activities
- Pleasure in everyday life is diminished
- "Flat affect," or the lack of emotional expression through facial expression or voice tone
- Reduced speaking

Cognitive symptoms

Attention, concentration, and memory problems are examples of cognitive symptoms. Some people's cognitive symptoms of schizophrenia are subtle, but for others, they are more noticeable and interfere with activities such as following conversations, learning new things, or remembering appointments. Individuals commonly experience the following symptoms:

- Difficulties in processing information in order to make decisions
- Problems with applying information right away after learning it
- Having difficulty focusing or paying attention

TREATMENTS AND THERAPIES

Because the causes of schizophrenia are complex and not fully understood, current treatments focus on symptom management and resolving problems with day-to-day functioning. Among the treatments are:

Antipsychotic medications

Antipsychotic medications can assist in reducing the severity and frequency of psychotic symptoms. They are typically taken on a daily basis as pills or liquids. Some antipsychotic medications are administered as injections once or twice a month, which some people prefer to daily oral doses. Clozapine is typically given to patients whose symptoms do not improve with standard

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antipsychotic medication. Clozapine patients must have routine blood tests to detect a potentially dangerous side effect that occurs in 1-2 percent of patients.

Many people who start taking antipsychotic medications experience side effects such as weight gain, dry mouth, restlessness, and drowsiness. Some of these side effects fade with time, but others may persist, prompting some people to discontinue their antipsychotic medication. Stopping medication abruptly can be dangerous, and it can exacerbate schizophrenia symptoms. People should not discontinue antipsychotic medication without first consulting with a health care provider.

The recommended strategy for determining the best type of medication or medication combination and the appropriate dose is shared decision making between doctors and patients. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) website has the most up-to-date information on warnings, patient medication guides, and newly approved medications.

Psychosocial treatments

Cognitive behavioural therapy, behavioural skills training, supported employment, and cognitive remediation interventions may all aid in the treatment of negative and cognitive symptoms of schizophrenia. It is common to use a combination of these therapies and antipsychotic medication. Psychosocial treatments can be beneficial in teaching and improving coping skills for dealing with the day-to-day challenges of schizophrenia. They can assist people in achieving their life objectives, such as attending school, working, or forming relationships. Individuals who receive

regular psychosocial treatment are less likely to relapse or require hospitalisation. More information on psychosocial treatments can be found on the NIMH website's Psychotherapies page.

Family education and support

Educational programmes for family members, significant others, and friends teach about schizophrenia symptoms and treatments, as well as ways to help the person suffering from the illness. Increasing key supporters' understanding of psychotic symptoms, treatment options, and the course of recovery can reduce distress, boost coping and empowerment, and improve their ability to provide effective assistance. Individual family-based services may be provided, as well as multi-family workshops and support groups. Visit the National Alliance on Mental Illness website's family education and support groups page for more information about family-based services in your area.

Coordinated specialty care

Coordinated Specialty Care (CSC) is a broad term for recovery-oriented treatment programmes for people suffering from first-episode psychosis, a precursor to schizophrenia. CSC is delivered by a team of health professionals and specialists who provide psychotherapy, medication management, case management, employment and education support, and family education and support. The person suffering from early psychosis and the treatment team collaborate to make treatment decisions, involving family members as much as possible. CSC is more effective than standard care for early psychosis at reducing symptoms, improving quality of life, and increasing involvement in work or school. More information about CSC programmes can be found here.