

# SCHIZOPHRENIA

*The least understood of all mental illnesses is schizophrenia (skits-oh-fren-i-ah). Schizophrenia is characterized by disturbed thinking, emotional barriers, and a partial divorce from reality. This disorder affects one in every 100 Americans, about two million in all.*

## ▼ Who can get schizophrenia.

Schizophrenia can develop suddenly or gradually and can affect people of any age. It is rare in children, where it is believed to be related to autism. Adolescents can have schizophrenia, but diagnosis is difficult because adolescence is naturally a time of rapid and major changes in personality and behavior.

People under 25 account for most episodes of schizophrenia and it rarely strikes for the first time in people over 45. Men are thought to be most susceptible during their 20s and 30s and women are more vulnerable during pregnancy, childbirth, and menopause.

## ▼ Symptoms.

Schizophrenia is a complex disorder affecting a person's entire personality. People with the disease often exhibit many of the following symptoms:

- a distorted sense of reality and changing perceptions of people, actions, or the world in general;
- delusions or hallucinations with beliefs or convictions that are seemingly untrue.
- numbed emotions that make it difficult for them to relate to other people or to react to situations that normally would cause strong emotions — or an inappropriate show of emotions such as laughing in a sad situation;
- feelings of isolation and a withdrawal from other people;
- disordered thinking and an inability to concentrate, to make logical connections, or to speak coherently; and
- feelings of fear, for the world of a person with schizophrenia is frightening, unpredictable, and unbearably lonely.

Some people with these symptoms can function fairly well without treatment, others may be suffering from other disorders. All of us experience one or more of these symptoms at one time or another, but with schizophrenia, the symptoms are *severe* and *persistent*.

One of the more prevalent misconceptions of a person with schizophrenia is that he or she has "a split personality." *Split or multiple personalities is a symptom of an entirely different and extremely rare disorder.*

People with schizophrenia are no more violent than other people. On the contrary, their disease often makes them timid, withdrawn, and less violent.

## ▼ Causes.

The exact cause of schizophrenia is unknown; it is believed there is no single cause. Some of the suspected causes are physical in nature, such as chemical imbalances, birth defects, a virus-like infection, and heredity.

Schizophrenia, like other mental illnesses, is not caused by immorality or a weak will. It cannot be "willed away" or cured by "a good rest" or by being told to "get a hold of yourself."

## ▼ Treatment.

Schizophrenia can be treated. Many of those who receive treatment are able to live full and productive lives. Treatment takes three forms:

- drug therapy to control symptoms;
- psychotherapy to help break down isolation, reestablish relationships, and develop a network of support; and
- family and community support programs that include 24-hour crisis intervention, supported employment and housing, and training for families to help them provide the necessary support.

Some people with schizophrenia respond immediately to treatment. For others it may take months or years. A key factor is a person's ability to stay with a treatment plan. When supported by adequate and readily available community-based services that help a person stay with their treatment, individuals have a better chance of recovering.

**▼What else to do.**

Learn to recognize the symptoms of schizophrenia. Early and prompt treatment is more effective, costs less, and helps prevent relapses.

People with schizophrenia or any mental illness also face the stigma society attaches to their illnesses. This stigma causes discrimination against people with a mental illness in employment, housing, health care, and the ability to buy health insurance. By learning more about mental illness and the effectiveness of treatment, this discrimination can end, removing the stigma that acts as a barrier to successful treatment.

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