

Medical scheme

SCHIZOPHRENIA

This information sheet is for your general information and is not a substitute for medical advice. You should contact your doctor or other healthcare provider with any questions about your health, treatment or care.

What is schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a chronic psychiatric disorder, which affects all aspects of life. Symptoms of this condition can be quite disabling when left untreated. When the right treatment is commenced, the condition can be controlled.

Cause of schizophrenia

The exact cause of schizophrenia is unknown, but it is thought to be due to an imbalance of chemicals in the brain.

Who can get schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia affects all cultures, races and socio-economic groups and is also equally common in women and men. It is typically diagnosed in late teens to early thirties.

Symptoms of schizophrenia

The symptoms of schizophrenia fall into three broad categories which are positive, negative and cognitive.

Positive symptoms

This refers to symptoms that are specific to schizophrenia and which are not generally seen in healthy individuals.

Hallucinations

It is a sensory experience without any stimuli. It can be visual (sight), auditory (sound), olfactory (smell), tactile (touch) or gustatory (taste). There are different types of hallucinations:

- **Auditory hallucinations** - hearing voices or sounds that no one else can hear.
- **Visual hallucinations** - seeing people or objects that are not there.
- **Olfactory hallucinations** - smelling odours that no one else can smell.
- **Tactile hallucinations** - feeling sensations like fingers touching your body.
- **Gustatory hallucinations** - tasting something that isn't there.

Delusions

Delusions occur when an individual has false beliefs. These beliefs persist even when it is proven that this belief is incorrect. There are different types of delusions:

- **Grandiose delusions** - these are delusions of magnified worth, power, knowledge and identity.
- **Persecutory delusions** - false beliefs that you are being conspired against or being poorly treated in some way. The most common persecutory delusions are being followed, poisoned, harassed, cheated, attacked or prevented from achieving goals.
- **Somatic delusions** - belief that you have a medical condition or defect that does not exist.
- **Reference delusions** - false belief that remarks, events or objects in one's environment have personal significance. An example of this is believing that messages on radio or TV are specifically for you.

Thought disorder

Occurs when a person's thoughts are too confused. This can affect the way the person speaks or expresses ideas. Examples may include making up new words (neologisms), or stopping mid-sentence and being unable to continue and when asked why, the response is that the thought was removed from their mind.

Movement disorder

Abnormal body movements occur and certain motions may be repeated over and over.

Catatonia

This is a state in which a person does not move or respond to others.

Negative symptoms

This refers to disruption to normal emotions and behaviours. These symptoms may be confused with depression or aggression.

- Flat affect - refers to reduced expression of emotions in voice tone or facial expression.
- Inability or difficulty experiencing pleasure in everyday life.
- Inability or difficulty planning or carrying out sustained activities.
- Reduced speech - inability or difficulty maintaining or initiating conversation.

Cognitive symptoms

Cognitive impairment affects the areas of memory, processing, speed, attention and reasoning. Antipsychotic medication may impair the memory function as well.

Treatment of schizophrenia

- *Drug therapy* may include antipsychotic medication (medication used in exceptional circumstances).
- *Psychotherapy* is used in conjunction with medication and is carried out by qualified professionals.
- *Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)*, commonly known as shock therapy, is a low-voltage electric current to the body to cause a therapeutic seizure.
- *Psychosocial treatments* are given to help develop coping mechanisms to deal with the daily challenges of living with schizophrenia. Treatment includes psychotherapy, occupational therapy and social work intervention.
- *Family support* is also important, as studies show that if families attend support groups, there are benefits for both the family and person diagnosed with schizophrenia.

Tips for the person diagnosed with schizophrenia

- Take medication as your doctor advises and do not skip doses.
- Discuss any side-effects you may experience with your doctor so that your doctor can adjust your medication.
- Keep all follow-up appointments with your doctor.
- If your symptoms go away, do not stop your medication as schizophrenia is a chronic condition.
- If you feel the treatment is not working or helping, do not stop treatment on your own! Discuss your options with your doctor.
- Speak to your doctor, family and friends about how you are feeling.
- Learn more and research about your condition to be able to recognise early symptoms; this way you can get help and prevent a relapse from occurring.
- Join a self-help or support group, exercise regularly, maintain a good sleeping pattern and have a healthy, balanced diet.

Points to consider when caring for someone with schizophrenia

- Schizophrenia is a medical condition and acceptance of diagnosis is important when caring for the person. It is not anyone's fault, so do not feel guilty or ashamed or seek to blame anyone.
- Educating yourself on the condition will help with recognition of early warning signs of relapse.
- Encourage or help the person develop a daily routine to follow, because structure is important.
- Encourage or help the person stay on medication and to keep follow-up appointments with your doctor.
- Provide support by keeping open communication lines. This may allow the person to feel less alone when dealing with the condition.
- Try not to show excessive anxiety or distress and praise achieved goals without being overenthusiastic.
- Try to avoid harsh or direct criticism.
- It is important to make time for yourself as caring for a person with schizophrenia can be exhausting on the mind and body.
- Speak to the doctor about alternative care options if the person can no longer be cared for at home.

With help and treatment, many people with schizophrenia lead fulfilling lives.

References

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