

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a chronic brain disease that causes changes in thinking, perception, speech, and behavior. It occurs in approximately 1% of people throughout the world and affects equal numbers of men and women. Schizophrenia usually begins during adolescence or young adulthood.

An article in the July 25, 2001, issue of *JAMA* reports on brain function in patients with schizophrenia. The study measured patterns of brain responses to pleasant and unpleasant odors.

Symptoms of Schizophrenia

- Delusions—persistent false beliefs, such as being persecuted or controlled by other people or outside forces, receiving personal messages from the radio or television, or having special powers or abilities
- Hallucinations—hearing or seeing things that are not real, such as voices that nobody else can hear
- Disorganized speech—lack of logical connections in communication
- Severely disorganized behavior—problems maintaining appropriate, goal-oriented behavior
- “Negative” symptoms—loss of normal functions such as emotional expressiveness and motivation

Many of these symptoms can be caused by conditions other than schizophrenia or by the effects of drugs. Evaluation by your doctor is essential.

CAUSES OF SCHIZOPHRENIA

The causes of schizophrenia are not known, but research has shown that the brains of people with schizophrenia are different from those without the illness. Possible causes include genetic vulnerability, infections (such as viral infection during pregnancy), and problems with the body's immune system. These are topics of active research.

TREATING SCHIZOPHRENIA

- Certain medications (called **antipsychotic** drugs) help many patients with schizophrenia attain freedom from their symptoms, although there is no cure for the illness. To prevent relapses, medication must be taken regularly as prescribed by a physician.
- Individual and group therapy help patients understand themselves and their illness and can improve communication and social skills.
- Family education helps families understand schizophrenia and its treatment and improves communication and coping skills when dealing with a family member with schizophrenia. Educating the family may minimize the number of relapses and improve the outcome for patients.
- Self-help groups provide support to individuals with schizophrenia and their families and can be a way of organizing to increase awareness and funding for schizophrenia treatment and research.

There is no need to fear or avoid people with schizophrenia. It is important to remove the stigma of schizophrenia by showing concern and support for people with this serious illness.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American Psychiatric Association
888/357-7954
www.psych.org
- National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)
800/950-6264
www.nami.org
- National Mental Health Association (NMHA)
800/950-6642
www.nmha.org

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page Index on JAMA's Web site at www.jama.com.

Sources: American Psychiatric Association, National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, National Alliance on Research for Schizophrenia and Depression, National Institute of Mental Health/National Institutes of Health, National Mental Health Association, World Fellowship for Schizophrenia

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