FAQ

Schizophrenia

Frequently asked questions about schizophrenia

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Frequently asked questions about schizophrenia

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1. What is schizophrenia?[1,2]

Schizophrenia is a severe mental health condition that impacts a person's thoughts, emotions, and behaviour. Those affected may appear disconnected from reality and behave in unusual ways, causing distress for them and/or family members, friends, and significant others. The condition's symptoms can interfere with daily life and functioning, but effective treatment options are available.

2. What causes schizophrenia?[1-3]

The exact cause of schizophrenia isn't fully understood, but it's believed to result from a combination of genetics, brain chemistry, and environmental factors. Risk is higher in people with a close relative with schizophrenia, and genetics have been estimated to account for up to 80% of the overall risk. Imbalances in neurotransmitters, such as dopamine and glutamate are also thought to play a role. Environmental factors, such as prenatal exposure to viruses, malnutrition, and a lack of oxygen during birth, may also contribute, as well as traumatic early life experiences, or drug abuse.

3. How common is schizophrenia?[3-5]

Schizophrenia impacts around 0.3% of people worldwide, while the lifetime risk of developing schizophrenia is often estimated at around 0.7%. It is not as common as many other mental disorders. The condition typically emerges in late adolescence or early adulthood, with men often experiencing onset earlier than women.

4. What are the symptoms and signs of schizophrenia?[1,2]

Schizophrenia symptoms are categorized as psychotic, negative, and cognitive:

- **Psychotic symptoms** (also called "positive" symptoms because they are in addition compared to what people usually experience or display): Include hallucinations (e.g., hearing voices or seeing things that are not there), delusions (irrational beliefs, such as

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feeling persecuted or that one's thoughts can be heard), disorganized thought (thinking or speech) or behavior (erratic or in severe cases immobility, or a general lack of response ("catatonia"). These symptoms disrupt perceptions of reality.

- **Negative symptoms** (because they are less present or absent compared to what people usually experience or display): Include reduced motivation, emotional expression, speech, social interaction, and joy in things that the individual usually finds pleasurable, sometimes resembling depression.

- **Cognitive symptoms**: Include impairments to memory, attention, and decision-making, as well as perception or interpretation of social context and interactions. These symptoms can make it hard to follow conversations, learn, or remember appointments or take medications as prescribed.

These symptoms can significantly impact daily life and functioning, but their severity varies across individuals and their illness stage. Proper evaluation and treatment can help manage these symptoms effectively.

5. How is schizophrenia diagnosed?[1,2,6]

Schizophrenia is diagnosed by a mental health professional based on a comprehensive assessment of symptoms, medical history, and sometimes a physical exam. The diagnosis typically follows criteria outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) or International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10 or 11). Symptoms must persist for at least six months and interfere significantly with daily functioning. Often, the diagnosis also involves ruling out other mental health disorders or medical conditions that could cause similar symptoms.

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6. What treatment options are available for schizophrenia?[1-3,7-10]

Schizophrenia is a chronic condition that requires long-term treatment. While there is no cure, people living with schizophrenia can lead fulfilling lives with proper treatment and support. Early intervention and continuous treatment can help manage symptoms, prevent relapses, and improve overall functioning.

Treatment for schizophrenia aims to manage symptoms, improve daily functioning, and help individuals achieve personal goals such as education, career development, and relationships. Care typically combines medications, psychotherapy, and support services. The shorter the untreated duration of psychosis is, the better the overall response, and successful early intervention programs have combined medication and non-medication treatments successfully.

Medications, particularly antipsychotics, can help reduce symptoms such as hallucinations and delusions and help to prevent relapses. Psychotherapy, such as cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), can help patients manage symptoms and improve coping skills. Family therapy, group therapy, and social skills training can enhance communication and relationship skills, as well as improve medication adherence and relapse prevention. Negative and cognitive symptoms are less treatable, but physical exercise, cognitive remediation, social skills training, and treatment of any comorbid depression can be helpful. Additionally, side effects of medications that can worsen negative and cognitive symptoms, such as sedation, muscle stiffness and marked weight gain, should be avoided or addressed as much as possible when they occur.

Support services, including psychosocial rehabilitation, help social integration and improve quality of life. Integrated treatment for substance use is also crucial, as substance misuse can hinder recovery. This multifaceted approach enables

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individuals to manage their condition and lead fulfilling lives.

7. What strategies can support management and quality of life with schizophrenia?[8]

Supporting management and quality of life for someone living with schizophrenia involves understanding the condition and showing patience. Friends and family play an important role in providing both emotional and practical support. This can include monitoring mental health, recognising signs of relapse, and encouraging adherence to medication and attendance at medical appointments. Educating oneself about schizophrenia and connecting with support groups for families of people with schizophrenia can also be helpful strategies in supporting long-term management and quality of life.

Lifestyle strategies can also support the management of schizophrenia and improve overall quality of life. While lifestyle changes alone cannot treat schizophrenia, they can support well-being. Regular exercise, a healthy diet, and adequate sleep can help reduce stress, improve physical health, and may help improve cognitive symptoms. Avoiding substance and alcohol abuse is important, as substance use can worsen symptoms or trigger relapse. Building a strong support system and maintaining social connections within the community can also help individuals manage the challenges of living with schizophrenia.

Lexicon[1,2,7]

Antipsychotics: Medications that can minimise psychotic symptoms.

Catatonia: A condition characterized by extreme movement disturbances,

including lack of movement, rigidity, or meaningless repetition of actions or words.

Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy: Therapy that targets unhelpful thoughts and behaviours to reduce distress and improve functioning.

Cognitive Remediation: A behavioural intervention that uses cognitive exercises and strategy coaching to improve skills like attention and memory, with the goal of enhancing everyday functioning.

Delusions: False beliefs that remain unchanged even when there is evidence to the contrary, such as believing one is being persecuted without any basis for this.

DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition): A manual used by healthcare professionals to diagnose mental health conditions, including schizophrenia.

Hallucinations: Sensory experiences that occur without real stimuli, such as hearing voices or seeing things that are not present.

ICD-11 (International Classification of Diseases, Eleventh Revision): A global standard for diagnosing health conditions and diseases, maintained by the World Health Organization.

Malnutrition: A state in which the body does not receive enough nutrients, leading to physical and mental health issues.

Psychotherapy: Treatment of mental disorders through conversations with a therapist to improve thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.

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