

Learn about...

Schizophrenia

“Police hunt a serial killer dubbed ‘The Schizo’...” That is the beginning of an actual newspaper headline from 2003. Unfortunately this is often how people hear about schizophrenia—through sensational reports in the media. Strangely, the idea that people with schizophrenia are dangerous couldn’t be further from the truth. People who have schizophrenia are rarely violent or dangerous. So just what is schizophrenia?

What is it?

Schizophrenia is a mental disorder. It causes people to lose touch with reality and sometimes makes it difficult for them to think and speak in an organized way. (This loss of touch with reality is called psychosis. Psychosis is a part of schizophrenia, but may also be seen on its own. For more on psychosis, see the box on page 3.) It isn’t known exactly what causes schizophrenia, but researchers believe it involves changes in your brain’s structure and chemicals. These changes may be caused by both genetics and the environment. The changes in the brain are thought to cause something like a short in the brain’s circuit, which leads to symptoms. Schizophrenia is not the same thing as multiple personality disorder.

Who does it affect?

Schizophrenia affects up to 1 % of Canadians. That’s about 40,000 people in British Columbia alone or around the same number of people with Alzheimer’s disease. While scientists are still working hard to figure out what causes schizophrenia, we do know that it affects:

- **Young People:** Schizophrenia usually first shows up between the ages of 16 and 25.
- **Men and Women:** Schizophrenia affects men and women equally as often. Men usually start experiencing their symptoms earlier in life than women.
- **Families:** Schizophrenia seems to run in families. Having a family member who has schizophrenia can increase your chances of developing the disorder. If your brother, sister, mother or father have schizophrenia you are 10 times more likely to develop it. If both of your parents have it, you have a 40 % chance of developing it.



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“The changes in the brain are thought to cause something like a short in the brain’s circuit, which leads to symptoms of schizophrenia.”



Could I have Schizophrenia?

While schizophrenia looks different from person to person, it always causes changes in your abilities and personality. Because it is so different in each person, you may experience some or all of the symptoms below.

- I'm hearing voices other people tell me they can't hear
- I'm seeing things that other people tell me they can't see
- My thoughts take a long time to form, come too fast together, or don't form at all
- I'm convinced I'm being followed
- I feel immune to any kind of danger; I believe I can save the world
- I sometimes feel like I'm not actually in my body, that I'm floating
- I used to like being around other people; now I'd rather just be by myself
- I want to end my life or harm myself
- I'm having trouble remembering things, concentrating and making decisions
- I'm getting confused easily

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms it's important that you talk to your doctor. Because these symptoms could also be signs of other mental or physical health problems, your doctor can help figure out what is causing them. Often, people with schizophrenia also experience symptoms of anxiety and depression.

What can I do about it?

Schizophrenia is treatable, but there is no cure. The key to recovering from schizophrenia is knowing the signs and symptoms and getting help immediately. The sooner you start treatment, the faster and more completely you will recover. Schizophrenia symptoms usually first appear in young adulthood. This makes getting treatment as soon as possible very important. The earlier a young person gets treatment for schizophrenia, the less damage the disorder will do in this important growth stage of a person's life. This does not mean that it is ever too late for treatment. Recovery, in full or in part, is still possible even after having the disorder for decades. There are a lot of different things you can do to help treat schizophrenia. Talk to your doctor about which treatments below would be right for you.

Medication: Most people with schizophrenia can be treated with medications called anti-psychotics. These medications can help regulate the chemicals in your brain. Anti-psychotics have improved in the last few years. They are more effective and have fewer side-effects than they used to. You might have to try a few different kinds of medication and different amounts of medication before you find which one(s) work best for you.

Schizophrenia Myths and Facts

- schizophrenia is not caused by bad parenting, childhood trauma, poverty, street drugs or alcohol
- schizophrenia is not contagious
- schizophrenia is very different from dissociative disorder (what used to be called split or multiple personality disorder)
- schizophrenia is not a person's fault; it is a disorder caused by a combination of biological and genetic factors, and often triggered by environmental stressors
- people with this illness are at risk of harming themselves: since 20-40% of people with schizophrenia attempt suicide and 5% of people with the illness will complete the suicide, all talk of suicide should be taken seriously

Counseling: Counseling is a very important part of treatment for people with schizophrenia and their families. Working with your therapist, you can also learn how to recognize the symptoms of your illness earlier and the importance of taking your medications properly. Counseling can help you come to terms with what it means for you to have a mental illness and give you support in your recovery. Job, financial and social counseling can also be helpful for people with schizophrenia. One type of counseling known as cognitive-behavioural therapy has been shown to be helpful in helping improve certain symptoms like confused thinking.

Counseling is also good for families because it can help them learn about symptoms of and treatments for schizophrenia. They can also learn what they can do to help their loved one, especially during relapses or crisis.

Hospitalization and follow up: If you become extremely ill with schizophrenia you may need to go the hospital. There you will get around-the-clock care from people trained to help people with your condition. Once you are out of the hospital, regular check-ups with your doctor and/or community mental health team are a good idea. (See our 'Getting Help for Mental Disorders' sheet for more about mental health teams).



Support groups: You are not alone. Schizophrenia support groups, for both people with the illness and their families, are a great way to share your experiences and learn from the experiences of others.

Self-help: During and after treatment, there are some things you can do on your own to help keep you feeling better. Regular exercise, eating well, managing stress, spending time with friends and family, keeping in touch with your spirituality, and minimizing the use of alcohol and other drugs can help keep your symptoms from getting worse or coming back. Talking to your doctor, asking questions, and feeling in charge of your own health are also very important. Always talk to your doctor about what you're doing on your own.

A look at the terms

Below are the definitions of a few words that you might hear associated with schizophrenia.

- **Psychosis:** is the word used to describe symptoms people experience that cause them to lose touch with reality. These symptoms include things like hallucinations (hearing, seeing or feeling things that aren't real), delusions (believing something that isn't real) and thought disorder (when thoughts don't happen in an organized way). It is important to know the schizophrenia is NOT the same thing as psychosis. In fact, schizophrenia is one type of psychosis. Psychosis can be caused by other mental disorders such as depression, during or after drug use, or by physical changes like a head injury or tumour.
- **Schizoaffective disorder:** when a person has symptoms of schizophrenia and symptoms of a mood disorder like depression or bipolar disorder.
- **Negative symptoms:** symptoms of an illness, like schizophrenia, that decrease normal experiences a person has such as loss of interest in things they used to enjoy, lack of emotion or loss of concentration.
- **Positive symptoms:** symptoms of an illness, like schizophrenia, that are added to what a person normally experiences. Examples: hallucinations, delusions or strange thoughts.

Where do I go from here?

In addition to talking to your family doctor, check out the resources below for more information on schizophrenia:

Helpful resources available in English only are:

BC Schizophrenia Society

Visit www.bcscs.org or call 1-888-888-0029 (toll-free in BC) or 604-270-7841 (in Greater Vancouver) for resources and information on schizophrenia and psychosis including family support groups, respite care, support for children with a parent with a mental illness, and education courses for persons with schizophrenia and their families.

Canadian Mental Health Association, BC Division

Visit www.cmha.bc.ca or call 1-800-555-8222 (toll-free in BC) or 604-688-3234 (in Greater Vancouver) for information and community resources on mental health or any mental disorder.

BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information

Visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca for our Mental Disorders Toolkit, more fact sheets and personal stories about schizophrenia. The Toolkit is full of information, tips and self-tests to help you understand your disorder.

Your Local Crisis Line

Despite the name, crisis lines are not only for people who are in crisis. You can call for information on local services or if you just need someone to talk to. If you are in distress, call 310-6789 (no area code needed in BC) 24 hours a day to connect to a BC crisis line, without a wait or busy signal.

Resources available in many languages:

*For each service below, if English is not your first language, say the name of your preferred language in English to be connected to an interpreter. More than 100 languages are available.

HealthLink BC

Call 811 or visit www.healthlinkbc.ca to access free, non-emergency health information for anyone in your family, including mental health information. Through 811, you can also speak to a registered nurse about symptoms you're worried about, or a pharmacist about medication questions.

