

Schizophrenia Facts for Families



The Early Stages: Signs and Symptoms

more info:

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*This information should not be used as a substitute for the advice of a professional.
Consult a physician or a lawyer to discuss your individual facts and circumstances.*



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THE SCHIZOPHRENIA SOCIETY OF ONTARIO
SOCIÉTÉ ONTARIENNE DE LA SCHIZOPHRÉNIE
UNE SOURCE D'ESPOIR, DE SOUTIEN ET D'ENTRAIDE.

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Where can we go for help?

The Schizophrenia Society of Ontario is here to help. We're a family-based organization that understands what it's like to live with schizophrenia. Our objectives are to:

- > Provide family support and education
- > Promote public awareness and understanding
- > Advocate for better legislation and services for people with schizophrenia
- > Promote research into the causes, treatment and cure of schizophrenia

"to alleviate the suffering caused by schizophrenia"



Is there a cure for schizophrenia?

There's no cure right now, but researchers are learning more and more about schizophrenia and what causes it.

People working in the area of early intervention are trying to answer questions such as:

- > Do initial delays in treatment cause changes to the brain that make people less likely to respond to treatment later on?
- > Does early treatment make a relapse less likely?
- > Do relapses and untreated schizophrenia cause permanent harm?
- > Who is at high risk for getting schizophrenia?

As with many illnesses—like heart disease or cancer—identifying and treating schizophrenia early gives a person a much better chance at recovery.

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Schizophrenia usually appears between the ages of 15 and 30 years. But the disease can develop for years before it is actually diagnosed.

Researchers are learning more about the early stages of schizophrenia, known as the "prodromal" phase. If people can get help and treatment before the disease develops into full-blown psychosis, they have a much better chance for recovery. They may also avoid some of the long-term damage that the disease can cause as it develops.

Many communities now have early diagnosis and intervention programs, which work to identify people at risk of getting schizophrenia before the illness takes hold, and providing intense, comprehensive treatment for people as soon as they have had their first psychotic episode.

What are the early warning signs of schizophrenia?

At the beginning, the symptoms of schizophrenia tend to come on gradually. They may be subtle, and they may come and go.

Family members often say that they notice a change in their loved one's behaviour. These are some of the early signs of the illness:

- > Withdrawal –the person stops seeing friends or family, loses interest in their regular activities, and may seem depressed,

- > Problems at school or work, or difficulty thinking and concentrating,
- > Lack of energy,
- > Sleep problems – being very tired, or unable to sleep,
- > Unusual outbursts or antisocial behaviour,
- > Using words that don't make sense,
- > Suspicious thinking or paranoid behaviour,
- > Seeing or hearing things, talking to someone who is not there or laughing for no obvious reason,
- > Suddenly being obsessed with sex or religion,
- > Using alcohol or drugs. This is usually a way of coping with the illness.

What do I do if I think someone has schizophrenia?

If someone in your family is showing signs of schizophrenia, talk to a doctor right away. It's important that people with schizophrenia get treatment as soon as possible. Early treatment or intervention:

- > Increases the chance for recovery.
- > Helps speed up recovery.
- > Lowers the risk of other problems, such as suicide, depression, and conflict with the law.
- > Reduces the chance that schizophrenia will cause long-term problems in school, work, and other areas of the person's life.



Can schizophrenia be treated?

Yes, schizophrenia is a brain disease that can be treated. New technologies are helping doctors understand more about schizophrenia, and how the illness affects people. You may hear doctors talk about the different ways they can look at the brain and how it functions, including

- > EEGs (electroencephalograms),
- > CT (computerized tomography) and MRI (magnetic resonance imaging),
- > PET (positron emission tomography) scan.

Medication is the foundation of treatment. Fortunately, many of the newer drugs have fewer side effects than the older medications. This means people with schizophrenia can have a much better quality of life than they would have years ago. Doctors work closely with patients to find the right drug(s) and the right dose for each person.

In addition to seeing a psychiatrist, people recovering from schizophrenia often benefit from the services of a case manager or therapist. They will probably need help to understand their illness.

People with schizophrenia also need support in their community, like safe and affordable housing, and social and training programs. Family members and friends also need support, education, and counselling. They are an important part of the person's treatment and overall plan for recovery.

Why isn't everyone with schizophrenia diagnosed early?

There are many reasons for delays between the early signs of schizophrenia and diagnosis:

- > Adolescence is a time of change. Many parents notice that their teenager's moods and behaviours are changing, but they think it's "just a phase."
- > People with schizophrenia often do not realize they are sick.
- > There is no medical test that can tell if someone has schizophrenia. The diagnosis is based on many factors, including behaviours that the person reports and that others observe.
- > Most family doctors do not have specialized training to recognize psychiatric disorders.

Schizophrenia is a disease that still scares people and makes them uncomfortable. Because of the stigma attached to schizophrenia, families may be reluctant to accept the fact that a relative has the illness.



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