

What is

Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia

is a complex condition affecting the brain. At times how a person thinks, acts and feels may change dramatically and they may lose contact with reality. This is called psychosis. At other times, the person may feel depressed and withdraw from life. With treatment and support many people with schizophrenia manage their illness and lead regular lives. Schizophrenia doesn't mean the person has a split personality. Their behaviour may change but this is due to the illness and not a 'personality change'.

 *Find ways of coping that work best for you. These are different for every person, but are a critical step on the path to recovery.*

What are the signs?

The following may be signs of schizophrenia (n.b. they can also be signs of other conditions so it is important to seek professional help):

- **delusions** - unusual or altered beliefs, which seem quite real to the person, but are not shared by those around them, e.g. they may think that the tv has special messages for them or that they are famous
- **thought disturbances** - the person may feel their thoughts being interfered with, e.g. put into or taken out of their head, or broadcast so others will know what they are thinking
- **hallucinations** - a person hears, sees, feels or smells something that is not actually there, e.g. hearing voices that others can't hear
- **changed perceptions** - things may seem to speed up or slow down; colours and sounds may seem unusually intense to the person
- **confused talk** - the person's speech may be difficult to follow because their thinking is not following usual patterns
- **changed feelings** - the person may think their feelings have disappeared or they may experience uncontrollable feelings such as crying or laughter
- **changed behaviour** - as a result of the above symptoms and the illness itself, people's behaviour changes. They may behave in a very confused manner, at times being extremely active or doing very little. They may stop taking care of themselves. The person may not realise that their experiences are the result of being unwell

Less obvious signs may include: loss of motivation, withdrawing from social contacts, reduced emotion or speech and loss of interest and pleasure in life. A diagnosis of schizophrenia may be made if a person has experienced a number of these signs and behaviour changes over a period of at least six months.

 *SEEK HELP! With early identification and treatment, the symptoms and effects of schizophrenia can be controlled.*

What causes schizophrenia?

The exact cause of schizophrenia is unknown. Current theories see it as a diverse condition, possibly reflecting a number of separate underlying causes. It may be due to an imbalance of certain brain chemicals, differences in brain structure, infections during pregnancy or birth or birth complications. It is thought that schizophrenia results from a convergence of underlying factors with other stressors such as trauma, loss of a job, poverty, grief or relationship problems.

How is it treated?

Ideally the person is treated in the community rather than in hospital. Inpatient care is reserved for situations where the level of a person's symptoms is endangering their own or others' safety or preventing treatment. Treatment and management of schizophrenia usually includes:

- antipsychotic and sometimes mood stabilising medications
- supportive counselling to help the person deal with emotions, manage stress and learn problem-solving techniques
- ongoing support with monitoring and treatment for those who risk relapse; support with housing and employment opportunities
- information on schizophrenia and support for the person and their whanau/family or friends

Complementary therapies which enhance the person's life e.g. massage, may be used in addition to medication and counselling.

Who gets it?

Approximately one in every 100 people develops schizophrenia. It most often begins between the ages of 15 and 30, occurring at a slightly earlier age in males than in females. Schizophrenia occurs in approximately the same proportions across all ethnic groups.

Where can I get more information?

Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand

for resources, videos, books and further information.

81 New North Road, Eden Terrace, Auckland

Phone: (09) 300 7030, Fax: (09) 300 7020

Email: resource@mentalhealth.org.nz

Website: www.mentalhealth.org.nz

(see 'Information' for a full description of schizophrenia)

SF - Schizophrenia Fellowship (NZ) Inc

National Office

PO Box 593, Christchurch

Phone: (03) 3661909, Fax: (03) 379 2322

Email: sfnat@voyager.co.nz

Website: www.sfnat.org.nz

Check the phone book for details of your local branch

