

Tip Sheet: Understanding Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a serious mental health concern that interferes with a person's ability to think clearly, manage emotions, make decisions and relate to others. It is a complex, long-term medical illness, affecting about 1% of Americans. Although schizophrenia can occur at any age, the average age of onset tends to be in the late teens to the early 20s for men, and the late 20s to early 30s for women. It is uncommon for schizophrenia to be diagnosed in a person younger than 12 or older than 40. It is possible to live well with schizophrenia.

Symptoms

The first sign can include a change of friends, a drop in grades, sleep problems and irritability. Other factors include isolating oneself and withdrawing from others, an increase in unusual thoughts and suspicions and a family history of psychosis. In young people who develop schizophrenia, this stage of the disorder is called the "prodromal" period.

With any condition, it's essential to get a comprehensive medical evaluation so they can obtain the best diagnosis and receive the help they need. For a schizophrenia diagnosis, some of the following symptoms are present for at least 6 months:

- Hallucinations: These include a person hearing voices, seeing things or smelling things others can't perceive
- Delusions: These are false beliefs that don't change even when the person who holds them is presented with new ideas or facts
- Negative symptoms: These diminish a person's abilities, such as being emotionally flat, unable to follow through with activities, or showing little interest in life or sustaining relationships
- Cognitive issues/disorganized thinking: This includes struggling to remember things, organizing thoughts or completing tasks

Causes

Researchers suggest that schizophrenia may have several possible causes including genetics, environment, brain chemistry and substance use.

Treatment

There is no cure for schizophrenia, but it can be treated and managed in several ways:

- Antipsychotic medications
- Psychotherapy, such as cognitive behavioral therapy and assertive community treatment and supportive therapy
- Self-management strategies and education

Source: National Alliance on Mental Illness