

# What Is Schizophrenia?

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## Signs and Symptoms

Schizophrenia is a mental illness that usually strikes in late adolescence or early adulthood, but can strike at any time in life. The signs and symptoms vary from individual to individual, but all people with the disorder show one or more of the following symptoms:

1. **Delusions:** These are beliefs that are not true, such as feeling people are following or trying to hurt them, believing other people can read their minds, or beliefs that they have special powers or abilities.
2. **Hallucinations:** This usually takes the form of hearing voices that are not there, but people with schizophrenia may also see, smell, taste, and feel things that are not there.
3. **Bizarre behavior:** This can be expressed in many different ways. In short, the individual behaves in ways that seem inappropriate or strange to other people.
4. **Disorganized speech:** The individual speaks in ways that are hard to understand. For instance, sentences might not make sense, or topic of conversation changes with little or no connection between sentences. Sometimes speech is completely incomprehensible.
5. **"Negative symptoms":** This includes lack of motivation or interest, diminished cognitive functioning, and decreased emotional expression. Individuals may lose interest in attending to their own personal hygiene, have little interest in interacting with others, and rarely seem to feel or express strong emotions.

In addition to these above symptoms, people with schizophrenia suffer a decline in their level of functioning; for instance, they may not be able to work at a job that requires the same level of skill or concentration as the job they held before they became ill required, or they may lose all ability to withstand the pressures of the working world. They may show a decline in their ability to attend to household chores or all the demands of raising their children, and/or they may not be able to have a full social life anymore.

Sometimes schizophrenia is a chronic condition, and the individual afflicted is constantly experiencing hallucinations or other symptoms of the disorder. Other people have periods of time when they are relatively symptom-free but have periods of more acute psychosis. Every individual is different, and every person with schizophrenia experiences the disease in a different way.

## What treatments are currently available?

Just as different people with schizophrenia can experience different symptoms, the effective treatment for each person is different. Each individual's treatment program can include one or more of the following:

**Medication:** Finding the right medication can be difficult, and a trial-and-error process may have to occur. It is important to be open with the psychiatrist, reporting what symptoms and side-effects are occurring, so the doctor can help to find the best medication to meet individual needs of each patient. It is also important to learn the contraindications of certain medications, such as the effects of alcohol or sunlight on the effectiveness of the medication.

**Education:** The person with schizophrenia and his or her family members can benefit from learning all they can about the disorder, including how to diminish stress and conflict, which can sometimes help spark a relapse. It is also important to learn what resources are available in the community for treating mental illnesses.

**Individual, group, and family therapy:** This can help with problems that arise day to day, as well as setting realistic goals and defining strategies for reaching those goals.

**Hospitalization:** This is required during some acute phases of the illness or sometimes in order to make changes in medication in a well-controlled, monitored environment.

**Support groups:** These can be very important for those with schizophrenia and for their family members and friends. See below for a list of support groups.

**Residential, day-treatment, and vocational programs:** These programs can help the person with schizophrenia reach his or her highest potential and greatest level of independence. Staff in these programs become well-acquainted with their clients and can help their clients find living arrangements, work, and recreational activities that are well-suited to each client's needs.

## What help is available for the family and caretakers of individuals with schizophrenia?

There are a number of national organizations that provide information and support to individuals with schizophrenia and their loved ones. The internet site [www.schizophrenia.com](http://www.schizophrenia.com) contains a comprehensive information source and referral service.