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Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a medical illness that affects approximately 2.2 million American adults, or 1.1 percent of the population age 18 and older. Schizophrenia interferes with a person's ability to think clearly, to distinguish reality from fantasy, to manage emotions, to make decisions, and to relate to others. The first signs of schizophrenia typically emerge in the teenage years or early twenties, and most people with schizophrenia suffer chronically or episodically throughout their lives.

Symptoms of Schizophrenia

Positive symptoms, or "psychotic" symptoms, include delusions and hallucinations. "Positive," as used here, does not mean "good." Rather, it refers to having overt symptoms that should not be there. Delusions cause the patient to believe that people are reading their thoughts or plotting against them, that others are secretly monitoring and threatening them, or that they can control other people's minds. Hallucinations cause patients to hear or see things that are not there.

Disorganized symptoms include confused thinking and speech and behavior that does not make sense. For example, patients with schizophrenia sometimes have trouble communicating in coherent sentences or carrying on conversations with others. They may move more slowly, repeat rhythmic gestures, or make movements such as walking in circles or pacing. They may have difficulty making sense of everyday sights, sounds, and feelings.

Negative symptoms include emotional flatness or lack of expression, an inability to start and follow through with activities, speech that is brief and lacks content, and a lack of pleasure or interest in life. "Negative" does not refer to a person's attitude but to a lack of certain characteristics that should be there. It can include a lack of motivation for productive activity.

Cognitive symptoms include the inability to remember and to plan for achieving goals. Also, attention and motivation are diminished. Schizophrenia may also affect mood. Many individuals with schizophrenia become depressed, and some individuals also have apparent mood swings and even bipolar-like states.

Causes of Schizophrenia

Scientists still do not know the specific causes of schizophrenia, but research has shown that the brains of patients with schizophrenia are different, as a group, from the brains of people without the illness. Like many other medical illnesses such as cancer or diabetes, schizophrenia seems to be caused by a combination of problems including genetic vulnerability and environmental factors that occur during a person's development. Recent research has identified the first genes that appear to increase risk for schizophrenia. Like cancer and diabetes, the genes only increase the chances of becoming ill, and do not cause the illness all by themselves.

Treatment of Schizophrenia

While there is no cure for schizophrenia, it is a highly treatable and manageable illness with medication, hospitalization when needed, therapy, education, support, and case management.

Medication: The primary medications for schizophrenia are called antipsychotics, and they help relieve the positive symptoms of schizophrenia by correcting an imbalance in the chemicals. Newer medications may also treat the negative, cognitive and mood symptoms. As with drug treatments for other physical illnesses, many patients with severe mental illnesses may need to try several different antipsychotic medications or a combination of medications to find what works best. Patients may stop treatment because of medication side effects, disorganized thinking, or because they feel the medication is no longer working. This puts patients at high risk of relapse into an acute psychotic episode.

Hospitalization: Hospitalization may be necessary at times to treat severe delusions or hallucinations, serious suicidal thoughts, an inability to care for oneself, or severe drug or alcohol problems. It also is needed to protect patients from hurting themselves or others.

Therapy, Education, and Support: Therapy, education, and support are useful in treating schizophrenia. Patients and their family members need to understand the illness and learn to recognize symptoms so that the patient can seek intervention before symptoms become worse. For additional education and support, patients and families can contact the resources below.

Case Management: Case managers assist patients with schizophrenia to live as independently as possible by screening symptoms, assuring that patients receive medications and attend medical appointments, and assisting patients in other daily living tasks.

Resources

National Alliance on Mental Illness
www.nami.org ~ (812) 423-4333

Mental Health America
www.nmha.org ~ (812) 426-2640

National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov