

What is Schizophrenia?



What is schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a condition which affects thinking, feeling and behaviour and causes people to have abnormal experiences. It is a mental illness and it is *not* caused by witchcraft or spirits. A person with schizophrenia may become upset, anxious, confused and suspicious of other people. They may be unaware, or reluctant to believe, that they need help.

How common is it?

About one in every hundred people is diagnosed with schizophrenia during their lifetime and everyone diagnosed with schizophrenia will have a different experience of the symptoms.

What are the symptoms?

Positive symptoms include:

Delusional beliefs

You may have strongly held beliefs or experiences that are not in line with a generally accepted reality.

Hallucinations

You might hear voices or sounds that others don't hear or see things that others don't see

Strange thinking ('thought disorder')

Your thoughts and ideas may seem jumbled and make little sense to others.

Negative symptoms include: lack of interest, lack of emotions, difficulty concentrating, wanting to avoid people.

What causes schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is caused by a combination of factors; someone's genetic make-up could make them more vulnerable, but stressful life events or drug use e.g. Cannabis, could trigger the onset of symptoms.

Are people diagnosed with schizophrenia dangerous?

A diagnosis of schizophrenia does not mean „split personality“, nor indicate that someone will be violent.

What treatment is available?

An assessment is made by a psychiatrist who will make a diagnosis. **Medication** can be very helpful with reducing the symptoms. **Talking treatments** including counselling and psychotherapy are also helpful in addition to medication. If the person is feeling particularly distressed, they may prefer to go somewhere that feels safe and undemanding, which may mean going into hospital.

How can family and friends help?

If you are concerned about someone possibly having schizophrenia, it is important that they are assessed by a psychiatrist as soon as possible. As a friend, relative or partner, you can have a vital role in helping someone recover and reducing the likelihood of them having a relapse. A person with schizophrenia can be more sensitive to stress, so you can help by avoiding arguments, not blaming them and keeping calm.

What is Bipolar Disorder?



What is bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder is a mental health condition that involves extreme swings in moods, from feeling extremely energetic, overly-excited or irritable-known as "**mania**", to feeling low in mood, with decreased energy, known as "**depression**". Between these severe highs and lows, there may be stable times.

What are the symptoms?

Manic symptoms can include:

- elevated or irritable mood
- increased activity, restlessness and excitement
- talking very fast
- loss of normal social inhibitions
- decreased need for sleep
- inflated self-esteem
- increased sexual drive
- risky behaviour

Depressive symptoms can include:

- loss of interest in daily life
- feeling guilty or worthless
- lack of energy
- difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much
- weight loss or gain
- changes in appetite
- a sense of hopelessness
- suicidal feelings

What causes bipolar disorder?

Bipolar disorder does run in families, suggesting a genetic link. Most research suggests that a stressful environment, social factors, or physical illness may trigger the condition. Sleep disturbance can be an important contributor.

How is it diagnosed?

It is best to first eliminate any potential physical causes of symptoms. For example, an overactive thyroid gland can mimic the symptoms of bipolar disorder. Street drugs like cocaine, ecstasy or amphetamine can also cause symptoms similar to mania. It is best to be seen by a psychiatrist who can make the correct diagnosis.

What treatment is available?

Medication is important to reduce symptoms, which can include "**mood stabilisers**". **Talking treatment** is also helpful in addition to medication, providing education about the illness and medication. If the person is particularly distressed or unable to cope at home, they may benefit from a hospital admission.

How can family and friends help?

It is helpful if the family or carer is also aware of the importance of medication and to know what early warning symptoms to look out for.

What is Depression?



What is depression?

Depression is a mental health condition in which the person experiences persistent low mood, loss of interest and enjoyment, and reduced energy. Depressed people tend to have unrealistic negative opinions about themselves, their life and their future.

How common is it?

It is a very common problem that can happen to anyone. One in five people become depressed at some point in their lives.

What are the symptoms?

- feeling emotionally empty
- loss of interest in daily life
- feeling guilty or worthless
- lack of energy
- difficulty sleeping or sleeping too much
- changes in appetite
- weight loss or gain
- lack of concentration
- a sense of hopelessness
- suicidal feelings
- In **severe** depression some people may see or hear things that others around them don't, or hold uncommon, unshared, beliefs which may be distressing and upsetting for the person experiencing them.

What causes depression?

Depression does seem to run in families to some extent. Sometimes there may be an obvious reason for becoming depressed, sometimes not. The reason may seem obvious - a relationship breakdown or a bereavement or even the birth of a child - sometimes it is not clear. Alcohol is a depressant, and will tend to make you feel worse overall. Some street drugs can also make you depressed, especially if used repeatedly.

What treatment is available?

An assessment should be made by a psychiatrist who will make a diagnosis. **Medication** can be helpful with reducing the symptoms. **Talking treatments** such as **Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)** help to identify and change negative thoughts and feelings affecting your behaviour. In severe depression, it may be necessary to be cared for in hospital as an in-patient.

How can family and friends help?

It is helpful to encourage the person to resume prior social activities as far as possible, and to encourage them to continue to take medication if it has been prescribed. Try not to blame the person for being depressed, or tell them to „pull themselves together“. They are probably already blaming themselves, and criticism is likely to make them feel even worse.

What is Epilepsy?



What is epilepsy?

Epilepsy is a physical health condition involving recurrent seizures/fits. It is *not* contagious and it is *not* caused by witchcraft or spirits. It is a long-term condition, but seizures can be controlled with medication for most people with epilepsy. Seizures are caused by abnormal electrical discharges in the brain.

How common is it?

Around five people in every 100 will have an epileptic seizure at some time in their life. Out of these five people, around four will go on to develop epilepsy. There are many types of epilepsy.

What are the symptoms?

- **Non-convulsive** epilepsy has features such as a change in awareness, behaviour, emotions, or senses (such as taste, smell, vision or hearing).
- **Convulsive** epilepsy has features of sudden muscle contraction, causing the person to fall and lie rigidly, followed by the muscles alternating between relaxing and being rigid, what is known as a convulsion. There may be loss of bladder and/or bowel control causing incontinence.

What causes epilepsy and seizures?

There are several causes; it may run in families, or may occur in people who have a past history of trauma at birth, brain infections or head injury. The person should be assessed medically to investigate for possible causes which may need treatment.

What treatment is available?

The vast majority of seizures can be stopped or significantly reduced by medication (**antiepileptic medication**).

Can someone with epilepsy lead a normal life?

Yes. They can marry, have children and work in most jobs. However, they should avoid certain jobs such as working with or near heavy machinery. They should avoid excessive alcohol and any recreational drugs, sleeping less than usual, swimming or bathing with no-one around, or being exposed to flashing lights. There are laws related to driving with a diagnosis of epilepsy which must be observed.

What should I do if someone I am with is having a seizure?

- Lay the person down, on their side, with their head turned to the side. This helps with breathing and prevents the patient choking.
- Make sure the person is breathing properly
- Do not try to restrain the person, or put anything in the person's mouth
- Stay with the person until the seizure stops and they wake up
- If the convulsion lasts for more than 30 minutes or the person **does not recover consciousness** between convulsions the patient needs to be in **hospital urgently**.

Alcohol & Mental Health



What are the problems with alcohol?

Most of us use alcohol for enjoyment, but for some of us, drinking can become a serious problem. It is a tranquilliser, it is addictive, and is the cause of many hospital admissions for physical illnesses and accidents at home and on the roads. Alcohol affects your judgment, so you do things you wouldn't normally think of. It makes you less aware of risks and so more vulnerable. You are more likely to have fights, arguments, money troubles, family upsets, or spur-of-the-moment casual sex.

Physical health problems

Being very drunk can lead to severe hangovers, stomach pains (gastritis), vomiting blood, unconsciousness and even death. Drinking too much over a long period of time can cause liver disease and increases the risk of some kinds of cancer

Mental health problems

Although we tend to think of alcohol as something we use to make us feel good, heavy drinking can bring on depression. Many people who kill themselves have had drinking problems. Alcohol can stop your memory from working properly and can cause brain damage. If you are **dependent** on alcohol, **withdrawal symptoms** can be dangerous, including seizures/fits. It can even make you hear noises and see things that others cannot, become confused, and have frightening beliefs which can be a very unpleasant experience.

Warning signs of alcohol dependence

- you do not feel right without a drink, or need a drink to start the day
- you get very shaky, sweaty, and anxious/tense a few hours after your last drink
- you can drink a lot without becoming drunk
- you need to drink more and more to get the same effect
- you try to stop, but find you can't
- you carry on drinking even though you can see it is causing problems with your work, family and relationships
- you get "memory blanks" where you can't remember what happened for a period of hours or days.

Getting help

- A psychiatrist or a psychologist may be able to help you find ways of overcoming worries that you may have been coping with by using alcohol.
- Groups where you meet other people with similar problems can often be very helpful. There are self-help groups e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous, or those run by professionals at a hospital/clinic.
- If you are drinking heavily, it is important to reduce your drinking gradually, as stopping suddenly can be dangerous and cause symptoms of withdrawal.



Cannabis & Mental Health

What are the problems with cannabis?

For many people, cannabis, also known as dagga and marijuana, is a way to relax. But research shows that it can cause mental health problems in some vulnerable people.

How does it work?

Several chemicals in cannabis bind to receptors in areas of the brain that deal with pleasure, memory, thought, concentration and the awareness of time. These include:

- *Cannabinoids* which give you the more pleasant effects - feeling relaxed, happy, sleepy, with colours appearing more vivid and music sounding better.
- *THC* which seems to produce hallucinations, anxiety and paranoia.

What mental health problems can it cause?

• **Depression & Anxiety**

The drug can stay in your system for some weeks, subtle effects can last a few days. Long-term use can make you depressed and anxious, and make you less motivated.

• **Cannabis-induced Psychosis**

Some people seem to get a short period of psychosis that is brought on by cannabis but which stops soon after the cannabis is stopped. This may include hearing and seeing things that others don't, and having strongly held beliefs or experiences that are not in line with a generally accepted reality. It can be a very unpleasant experience.

• **Schizophrenia**

If you start smoking cannabis before 15, you are 4 times more likely to develop a psychotic illness.

The more cannabis you use, the more likely you are to develop psychosis. Schizophrenia is a longer-lasting psychotic illness than cannabis-induced psychosis, and the symptoms do not reduce as soon after cannabis is stopped. It can also recur without cannabis.

Is cannabis addictive?

- It has some of features of addictive drugs - a regular user has to take more and more to get the same effect (tolerance) and can get withdrawal symptoms.
- 3 out of 4 long-term users get cravings, half become irritable and 7 out of 10 switch to tobacco to try to stay off cannabis. Many find that they spend much of their life seeking, buying and using it. It is probably about as hard to stop as tobacco.

Getting Help

A doctor can advise you how to access a counsellor or support group. These can help you to stop taking cannabis or to cut down the amount you use, and to reduce its impact on your life. They may help you to identify sources of stress relating to your cannabis use so that you can explore other methods of coping. Try and involve the support of friends and family.