



Patient education: Schizophrenia (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is schizophrenia?

This is a brain disorder that keeps you from thinking clearly. It can cause you to see or hear things that aren't there, or to believe things that aren't true.

What are the symptoms of schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia can cause:

- **Positive symptoms** – In this case, "positive" does not mean "good." Positive symptoms are **abnormal experiences or behaviors that occur** because of schizophrenia. Examples of positive symptoms include:
 - Hallucinations – These are when you hear, see, feel, smell, or taste things that aren't there. For example, people with schizophrenia often hear voices in their head telling them to do things when nobody is actually talking.
 - Delusions – These are when you believe things that are not true. For example, people with schizophrenia sometimes believe they are a famous person who is dead.
 - Disorganized thinking or speech – People with schizophrenia have trouble thinking clearly. They can talk a lot about many things before getting to the point. Sometimes, they make up words or say things that do not make any sense.
- **Negative symptoms** – In this case, "negative" does not mean "bad." Negative symptoms are **normal behaviors that stop** because of schizophrenia. Examples of negative symptoms include:
 - Not showing much emotion, and not changing your facial expression
 - Not moving or talking much

- Not taking showers or keeping clean
 - Not having much interest in spending time with people or having fun
 - **Cognitive symptoms** – These are symptoms that affect thinking and memory. People with schizophrenia have trouble:
 - Learning and remembering
 - Understanding speech or other forms of communication
 - Making sense of new information
 - Solving problems
 - **Emotional symptoms** – People with schizophrenia often also have symptoms of anxiety or depression.
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Is there a test for schizophrenia?

No. But your doctor or nurse should be able to tell if you have it by asking about your symptoms and doing an exam. Your doctor might need to do tests to make sure your symptoms are not caused by a different medical problem.

Get help right away if you are thinking of hurting or killing yourself!

If you ever feel like you might hurt yourself or someone else, help is available:

- In the US and Canada, contact the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline:
 - To speak to someone, call or text **988**.
 - To talk to someone online, go to chat.988lifeline.org.
 - Call your doctor or nurse, and tell them it is an emergency.
 - Call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, call 9-1-1).
 - Go to the emergency department at your local hospital.
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How is schizophrenia treated?

Treatment involves medicines to help control symptoms, as well as different types of counseling and support.

The medicines for schizophrenia often reduce symptoms, but they take some getting used to. People might need to try a few different medicines before finding the ones that work best and cause the fewest problems.

The medicines can cause uncomfortable side effects. If your medicines cause side effects, tell your doctor. They might be able to lower your dose, switch you to a different medicine, or help manage the side effects in other ways.

To manage schizophrenia, you usually must take medicines for the rest of your life. It's important to take them exactly as instructed. Otherwise, your symptoms could get worse.

It can also help if you and your family participate in a type of psychotherapy, or counseling, called "family psychoeducation." This can teach you and your loved ones some important concepts and skills, such as:

- Schizophrenia is a biological illness and not anyone's fault
- Ways to keep your condition from getting worse
- Ways to deal with your symptoms so they are less stressful

Other types of psychotherapy might also help.

What if I want to get pregnant?

Talk to your doctor before you start trying. Most people with schizophrenia need to keep taking medicines before and during pregnancy. But some people need to switch to medicines that are less likely to cause problems for the baby.

You might be tempted to stop taking your medicines to protect your baby. But this can actually do more harm than good. People who stop their medicines before or during pregnancy often get severe schizophrenia symptoms and then need more medicines than they would have if they had stayed on medicines in the first place.

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