Schizophrenia

Schizophrenia is a chronic, debilitating mental illness that affects 2.4 million Americans and 21 million people worldwide.\(^1\,\,^2\) Why some people develop schizophrenia is unknown, but the disease tends to appear in young adulthood.\(^3\) Men tend to develop schizophrenia slightly earlier, in their early- to mid-20s, while most females develop symptoms several years later.\(^2\,\,^4\) Schizophrenia is a lifelong disease, requiring adequate treatment and support.\(^5\)

Symptoms

The signs and symptoms vary from person to person. Initial signs can include isolating oneself, sleep problems and irritability. Although symptoms vary in type and severity among individuals, schizophrenia typically interferes with a person’s ability to think clearly, manage emotions, make decisions and relate to others.

Some individuals with schizophrenia experience hallucinations, the most common of which are “voices” that may talk to the person about his or her behavior, or influence their actions. However, a person with schizophrenia can experience a combination of symptoms – sometimes severe, other times hardly noticeable – that typically fall into three broad categories: positive symptoms (psychotic symptoms not seen in healthy people), negative symptoms (disruptions to normal emotions or behaviors) and cognitive symptoms (interfere with daily activities).\(^6\)

Diagnosis

Schizophrenia is not easily and efficiently diagnosed. It may go undiagnosed – and therefore untreated – for as long as three years after the onset of the first symptoms of psychosis.\(^7\) Early intervention and treatment are critical.

Treatment

There is no cure for schizophrenia, but it can be treated and managed in several ways, including antipsychotic medications, which are available in pill and liquid forms, as well as injections given once every two weeks or six weeks, or once every month or three months. Long-acting injectable antipsychotics provide patients with blood concentrations of active drug that remain within a therapeutic range for an extended period of time.\(^8\) Additional forms of treatment include psychotherapy, such as cognitive behavioral therapy and supportive therapy, as well as self-management strategies and education.

Approximately half of people with schizophrenia do not understand that they have the disease. This lack of understanding may be due to the way the condition affects the brain, and it likely contributes to difficulties with medication adherence.\(^9\) Only 41 percent of patients complied with schizophrenia medication regimes, according to a study looking at medicine adherence.\(^10\)

Research indicates that long durations of untreated schizophrenia are associated with poor outcomes.\(^11\,\,^12\,\,^13\)
Relapse
Relapse is a re-emergence or worsening of psychotic symptoms.\textsuperscript{14} Certain criteria often are used to define relapse, including aggravation of psychotic symptoms and hospital admission.\textsuperscript{15} Other common contributors to relapse include substance abuse and stressful life events. Recurring relapses are associated with decreased cognitive functioning, increased morbidity and progression of the illness.\textsuperscript{14}