

Schizophrenia and psychosis

Schizophrenia is a type of psychotic illness and is a long-term mental health condition. It causes a range of different psychological symptoms which include:

- hallucinations – hearing or seeing things that do not exist
- delusions – unusual beliefs that are not based on reality and often contradict the evidence
- muddled thoughts
- changes in behaviour

Misconceptions

Schizophrenia is often poorly understood.

Two of the most common misconceptions are:

- people with schizophrenia have a split or dual personality.
- people with schizophrenia are violent.

A person with psychosis will often experience the same symptoms as a person with schizophrenia, however these symptoms would be at the early stages and or be transient, often at times of increased stress.

A person who experiences psychosis is sometimes referred to as psychotic.

Who is affected?

Men and women are equally affected by schizophrenia which affects one in 100 people. Psychosis is more common, affecting approximately one in every 20 people in the UK.

Why does it happen?

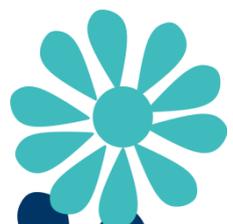
Research indicates that schizophrenia is caused by a combination of biological, psychological and environmental factors some of which you may not be able to avoid. Most people will be affected before the age of 30.

Misconceptions

Psychotic means you are a psychopath.

Having a psychotic illness is not the same as being a 'psychopath'. Psychosis is a more short-lived condition (compared with schizophrenia) which if effectively treated, can lead to a full recovery.

In contrast, a 'psychopath' is likely to be someone who has a long term antisocial personality disorder. This means they have very different problems, which often lead to them behaving in an antisocial manner.



A major cause of psychosis is illicit drug use. However, if you are already vulnerable to the condition, stressful life events (eg bereavement, losing your job or home, the end of a relationship or being abused) can trigger its development.

Women can occasionally be affected by psychosis after child birth. This is called Puerperal Psychosis.

Getting help

If you think you may be experiencing psychosis or schizophrenia you should visit your GP as soon as possible. The earlier treatment is sought, the more successful the outcome tends to be.

Your GP may refer you to a Community Mental Health Team (CMHT). These teams which are made up of mental health professionals will carry out a more detailed assessment of your symptoms.

Getting help for someone else

If you are concerned about someone else, you should encourage them to visit their GP. This may be difficult if they don't believe there is anything wrong. If they have previously been seen by a mental health team, they may have a Care Co-ordinator. Contact their Care Co-ordinator and express your concerns.

If you contact a healthcare professional about someone you know, they may be unable to share information with you about that person without their consent due to confidentiality. However, this should not stop you from sharing important information about that person or the professional listening to this. This can be particularly important if the person is at risk in any way. If you don't want your information to be known to the ill person, ask for it to be kept as 'third party' information

Treatment

Your treatment will be co-ordinated by a team, made up of a variety of mental health professionals. If this is your first episode of psychosis, you may be referred to an Early Intervention Team. You will receive a full assessment of your symptoms; you may also be prescribed anti-psychotic medication. You may also be offered psychological support (eg counselling or talking therapy) alongside social, occupational and educational interventions.

Medication

Most anti-psychotic medication works by blocking the effect of dopamine (a chemical which transmits messages in the brain). They can reduce feelings of anxiety or aggression within a few hours. However, it may take several days or weeks for them to reduce other psychotic symptoms such as hallucinations or delusional thoughts. Like all medication, some people will experience side effects.

Psychological treatments

For most people, having an understanding as to why they are experiencing psychosis and recognising their earliest signs of stress is an effective treatment option. For others CBT (cognitive behavioural therapy), a more in-depth and structured approach is more effective.

Social treatments

Often, individuals with psychosis and schizophrenia may lose some of their social skills, drifting away from friends and family and becoming more secluded and isolated from social events and generally losing confidence and self-esteem. Slowly re-establishing these relationships and becoming more socially involved can have long term benefits and aid recovery.

Living with schizophrenia and psychosis

Recognising when you are becoming unwell can help you manage your illness. Symptoms can include losing your appetite, feeling anxious or stressed or having disturbed sleep. You may also notice some of the aspects of psychosis, such as feeling suspicious or fearful, worrying about people's motives, hearing voices quietly or occasionally, or finding it difficult to concentrate. You may want to ask someone you trust to tell you if they notice a change in your behaviour.

Drugs and alcohol

While alcohol and drugs may provide short-term relief from your symptoms, they are likely to make your symptoms worse in the long run. Alcohol can cause depression and psychosis, while illegal drugs may make symptoms of psychosis worse. Drugs and alcohol can react badly with antipsychotic medicines.

Taking medication

It is important to take your medication as prescribed, even if you start to feel better. Continuous medication can help prevent relapses.

Regular reviews

Your care team will ensure your treatment is regularly reviewed to check it is working. A good relationship with your care team will help you to discuss your symptoms or concerns with them.

Self-care

As well as your care team, it is also important for you to look after yourself. Think about the things you can do to help yourself stay fit, maintain good physical and mental health, prevent illness or accidents, and effectively deal with minor ailments. A healthy lifestyle, including a balanced diet with lots of fruits, vegetables nuts and seeds and regular exercise, is good for you and can reduce your chances of developing other conditions.

Find out ways to manage stress more effectively and get enough sleep that you feel refreshed when waking.

Contacts

Royal College of Psychiatrists

The professional body of psychiatrists in the UK has a range of information on mental health.

Web: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/

Mind

A national mental health charity, Mind has a range of information leaflets and support networks.

Tel: 0300 123 3393

Web: www.mind.org.uk/

Hearing Voices Network

Information and support for people who hear voices and those who support them.

Tel: 0114 271 8210

Web: www.hearing-voices.org

Rethink

A national charity working to improve the lives of people with mental illness.

Tel: 0300 5000 927

Web: www.rethink.org/

Samaritans

Offer emotional support 24 hours a day

Tel: 116 123

Web: www.samaritans.org

Email: jo@samaritans.org

Devon Partnership NHS Trust

Web: www.dpt.nhs.uk

Specialist Teams for Early intervention in Pscyhosis:
www.dpt.nhs.uk/STEP

Livewell South West

Web: www.livewellsouthwest.co.uk/

Insight Team (based at The Zone):
www.livewellsouthwest.co.uk/services/insight-team

Cornwall Partnership NHS Trust

Web: <http://www.cornwallft.nhs.uk/>

Early Intervention in Psychosis Teams:
www.cornwallft.nhs.uk/services/community-mental-health-services/early-intervention-in-psychosis/

