

Centre for Mental Health

Swinburne University of Technology

What is schizophrenia (SZ)?

SZ is a mental health condition characterised by episodes of psychosis, involving difficulty in thinking, having unusual thoughts or beliefs, or hallucinatory experiences, such as hearing voices that aren't there. People with SZ can also have difficulty relating to other people, experience low motivation, speak less often or less clearly, lose the ability to express emotions, and feel much less enjoyment in activities. These experiences are often distressing, and can impact one's ability to function in daily life. Another similar mental health condition is schizoaffective disorder, where people experience additional episodes of elevated and/or depressed mood, alongside psychosis.

Prevalence of SZ

Approximately 0.5-1% of the population will develop SZ over their lifetime. The condition commonly begins in early adulthood between the ages of 15 to 25, with a slightly earlier onset in men than women. Other mental health conditions often occur alongside SZ, including depression, anxiety and substance use disorders. According to the World Health Organization, SZ is one of the top 10 causes of disability in developed countries worldwide.

Possible causes

It is not currently known exactly what causes SZ. A commonly supported theory proposes that the condition arises through a combination of biological, psychological, and social factors. In particular, certain genes are thought to contribute to an increased risk of developing the condition, as well as changes in brain function. Psychological and social factors are equally important, with a history of stressful or traumatic life experiences frequently associated with developing SZ. It can also be triggered by the use of psychoactive substances, such as cannabis.



Symptoms of SZ

People with SZ can vary in the symptoms they have. These include:

- Irrational or illogical beliefs
- Paranoia or suspicion of others
- Hearing voices or other modes of hallucinations
- Thinking difficulties, such as poor memory and decision-making
- Jumbled or disjointed thoughts or speech
- Feeling emotionally flat or dull
- Difficulties with motivation, lack of interest or social withdrawal

Treatment options

SZ is a treatable condition with up to 3 in 10 people showing lasting recovery, and 1 in 5 showing significant improvement. Treatment often involves a combination of medication, psychological therapy, and help with daily living skills. This is most often managed in the community, to help people with SZ cope with their symptoms, and live independent and fulfilling lives.