

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

"Schizophrenia affects young people in the prime of their lives. It can be a major set-back in their plans and hopes for the future."

-Dr. Ian Falloon

Q. WHAT ARE MY CHANCES OF DEVELOPING SCHIZOPHRENIA?

A. There is no way of knowing exactly who will get schizophrenia. However, about 1 in 100 people worldwide will develop the illness. Since schizophrenia tends to run in families, your chances may be higher if someone in your family has the disease. For example, it is estimated that:

- If one of your parents or a brother or sister is ill, the risk factor is about 10%
- If both your parents are ill, your chances are about 40%
- If a fraternal twin is ill, your chances are 10-15%
- If an identical twin is ill, your chances are 35-50%
- If you are a grandchild, niece, nephew, aunt or uncle of someone who is ill, your chances are about 3%.
- Schizophrenia does not discriminate between the sexes. Young men and women are equally at risk for developing the illness.

Q. CAN CHILDREN DEVELOP SCHIZOPHRENIA?

A. Yes. In rare instances, children as young as five have been diagnosed with the illness. They are often described as being different from other children from an early age. Most people with schizophrenia, however, do not show recognizable symptoms until adolescence or young adulthood.

Q. HOW CAN I TELL IF I HAVE SCHIZOPHRENIA BEFORE IT BECOMES SERIOUS?

A. If you think you have symptoms of schizophrenia, you should talk to a doctor who has experience treating the illness. This is very important because *early diagnosis and treatment means a better long-term prognosis.*

Q. IF I HAVE SCHIZOPHRENIA, SHOULD I HAVE CHILDREN?

A. Schizophrenia tends to run in families, but that doesn't necessarily mean you should not marry and have children. Since everyone wants to be a good parent and provider for their family, you will need to ask yourself some important questions:

- Is my illness sufficiently under control? If I have to work full-time in order to support my children, can I do it?
- Will the stress and expense of raising children cause me to become ill again?
- What if my children inherit the illness? (The chance of each of your children developing schizophrenia is 1 in 10. If your partner also has schizophrenia, the chance of each child developing the illness increases to 2 in 5.)
- Is my partner a capable person who can help provide a secure and peaceful home environment for a child?

As you see, these decisions are very personal—and will depend entirely on you and your own particular situation.

Q. MY FRIEND HAS SCHIZOPHRENIA. HOW CAN I HELP?

A. We all need friends who stick with us through good times and bad. People with schizophrenia will value your friendship. They are often discriminated against by those who are ignorant about the illness. Many people with schizophrenia have high IQ's. Unless someone is experiencing symptoms of their illness, there will be nothing especially unusual about their behaviour.

You can be a real friend by trying to understand the illness and by educating others when the opportunity arises. Let them know the facts. Also, if you can, try to get to know your friend's family. For example, the family might help you understand how your friend may sometimes be overwhelmed and discouraged because of the chronic and persistent nature of the illness. Once you know this, you can help by just being supportive and encouraging during these rough times. If you're planning social activities with your friend, it helps to remember:

- People with schizophrenia need to take their medication on time, keep a fairly regular schedule, and get enough sleep and rest.
- Because there may be some disabling periods of thought disorder, term papers and studying for exams can't be left until the last minute
- Using street drugs is very dangerous because they often trigger a return of symptoms (a relapse).

Q. DO STREET DRUGS EVER CAUSE SCHIZOPHRENIA?

A. No. Street drugs do not actually *cause* schizophrenia. Since some people who take street drugs may show schizophrenia-like symptoms, people who have schizophrenia are sometimes accused of being "high" on drugs. A person suffering from psychotic symptoms may also become involved in substance abuse, where having such symptoms in the setting of *getting high* is seen as normal.

Q. DOES A HISTORY OF MENTAL ILLNESS OR SCHIZOPHRENIA IN MY FAMILY MEAN THERE IS A GREATER RISK OF HAVING A PSYCHOTIC EPISODE IF I USE STREET DRUGS?

A. Evidence indicates that if someone has a predisposing factor, drugs like cannabis (marijuana, hash, hash oil, etc.) may trigger an episode of schizophrenia. This may or may not clear up when use of the drug stops. If your family has a history of mental illness, extra caution might be wise.

Street drugs can be risky for anyone, but for people with schizophrenia, they are particularly dangerous. As mentioned earlier, certain drugs can cause relapses and make the illness worse. All street drugs should be avoided, including:

- PCP (angel dust)
- cocaine/crack
- LSD
- amphetamines
- marijuana and other cannabis products
- ecstasy

Q. WHAT ABOUT ALCOHOL, COFFEE AND TOBACCO?

A. *Moderate* use of alcohol (one or two glasses of wine or beer) doesn't seem to trigger psychotic symptoms, but heavy use certainly does. People on medication should be especially careful. Since alcohol is a depressant, it can be life-threatening when combined with tranquilizers such as clonazepam (Rivotril), lorazepam (Ativan), diazepam (Valium), alprazolam (Xanax), etc. Each multiplies the effect of the other—often with disastrous results.

THE FOLLOWING MAY ALSO TRIGGER SYMPTOMS OF SCHIZOPHRENIA:

- large amounts of nicotine and/or caffeine
- cold medications and nasal decongestants.