

Schizophrenia

What is schizophrenia?

Schizophrenia is a psychotic illness that affects the functioning of the brain, interfering with the way a person thinks, feels and acts. The onset of schizophrenia reaches a peak in males between 18 and 25 years and in females between 25 years and mid-30s with a second peak of onset after menopause. However, functional impairment may begin many years earlier.

Schizophrenia affects approximately one in 100 people worldwide and occurs in people with a genetic predisposition but is triggered by as yet unknown environmental factors. A few people who develop schizophrenia will recover completely whilst in others treatment can alleviate the debilitating symptoms. However, up to 30% of people with schizophrenia remain treatment resistant and therefore new therapies are required to improve outcomes for those with the disorder. The only way to develop new and better treatments for schizophrenia is to identify and understand the causes of the disorder.

Diagnosis

Schizophrenia is characterised by two or more of the following:

- Delusions
- Hallucinations
- Disorganised speech
- Grossly disorganised or catatonic behaviour
- Negative symptoms (e.g. social withdrawal, reduced motivation/interest, inappropriate responses)

To permit diagnoses of schizophrenia, these symptoms must impair social and occupational functioning and continue for at least six months.

Treatment

Schizophrenia can be treated using medication, psychological and psychosocial interventions and community support can lessen the overall impact of the disorder on lifestyle. Although schizophrenia is a treatable condition, not all sufferers have access to appropriate treatment.

Research

The Florey is committed to increase understanding of the causes of schizophrenia and has a number of research projects underway to achieve this goal. These include:

- Understanding molecular changes in the brains of people with schizophrenia as a step toward identifying potential new drug treatment targets
- Defining the role of muscarinic receptors as a cause and target for treatment of schizophrenia. The muscarinic receptors are molecules critical to allowing proper information flow around the brain and we know if they are affected they can cause psychoses and cognitive deficits. We are in the process of developing a ligand (a molecule that bonds to specific receptors) for PET (positron emission tomography) neuroimaging that will allow us to measure levels of muscarinic receptors in living people

Research (cont.)

- Defining the mechanisms of action by which antipsychotic drugs reduce the symptoms of schizophrenia. Despite these drugs being available from the 1950's we still do not know how they bring about their therapeutic benefits
- Studying the mechanism by which aspirin improves the treatment outcomes when added to antipsychotic drugs
- Studying why oestrogen seems to lessen symptom severity and delay age of onset of schizophrenia
- Developing diagnostic tests for schizophrenia.

One in 100 people worldwide suffer schizophrenia.

Prevalence

Schizophrenia affects more than 21 million people worldwide, and between 150,000 and 200,000 Australians. About 20 to 30 per cent of people with schizophrenia experience only a few brief episodes. For others, it is a chronic condition.

More Information

To find out more about what's happening at the Florey Institute of Neuroscience and Mental Health please feel free to contact us (details below).

Support & Information Services

Please note that diagnosis and treatment of a clinical condition can only be undertaken by a qualified health professional. Listed below are some support services only. Always seek the advice of a qualified health professional with any questions regarding your health or a medical condition.

A number of support and information services exist to help people who experience schizophrenia, and to help support their families and friends.

These include:

SANE Australia
1800 18 SANE (7263)
www.sane.org

Reach Out Australia
<http://au.reachout.com/>

Mental Illness Fellowship of Australia
1800 985 944
<http://www.mifa.org.au/>

Lifeline
13 11 14
www.lifeline.org.au

Note: Statistics were obtained from World Health Organisation, and Better Health Victoria (a state government initiative).