

■ Incidence

Schizophrenia is a major mental illness that can affect anybody. One person out of every hundred will probably suffer from schizophrenia before they reach the age of 45. In Britain, about 35,000 people are admitted to hospital every year with the illness. This makes up about one-sixth of all the people in hospital. Schizophrenia occurs all over the world.

The illness tends to strike people first between the ages of 18 and 35, very often when they are in their prime, and when they are trying to establish independent lives. It occurs in both men and women although it tends to start a little later in women.

Schizophrenia affects all aspects of the sufferers' lives, including the way they think, how they feel and the way they behave. Those affected may hear voices, develop strange delusional ideas, or become apathetic, lose interest and change emotionally. One of the difficulties is that those affected may themselves be unaware that something is wrong. For the sufferer it is difficult to decide what is real and what is not real. It is a little like having a dream while being wide awake.

■ Myths about schizophrenia

A number of popular misconceptions exist. The first is that schizophrenia is about having a multiple personality, like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. This is completely untrue. Schizophrenia has nothing to do with being more than one personality; rather it can be regarded as a disintegration of personality. A second popular myth is that people who have schizophrenia are always dangerous and violent. Again this is untrue, as people with schizophrenia are often very timid and frightened and no more likely to commit violent crime than anybody else. A third myth is that schizophrenia is somehow the result of bad parenting. There is no scientific basis for this notion; an overwhelming amount of scientific evidence suggests that schizophrenia is a disease of the brain.

■ Diagnosis and outcome

Schizophrenia is a very difficult illness to diagnose and it is even more difficult to predict the outcome. There is no laboratory test for schizophrenia and the diagnosis is based on the patient's symptoms. About one-third of those affected have a single attack and recover completely. However, for others there may be further attacks or even an uninterrupted continuation of the symptoms. At the beginning of the illness it is not possible to tell who will recover and who will have to cope with long-term problems; that is why doctors and health workers are often slow or unwilling to reach a definite diagnosis and make firm predictions.