

There are many different theories, but the fact remains that at present the causes of schizophrenia are not really known. There seems to be no single cause; rather, the consensus view is that certain people have an in-built predisposition or vulnerability which can be triggered at certain times, by certain events.

There is no evidence that families cause schizophrenia. A great deal of material was published in the 1960s and early 1970s linking schizophrenia to family life, but none of it was based on formal research. The result of these publications was that some families felt guilty, believing that they had brought the problem on in some way. A family is usually the most valuable help and support available to somebody with schizophrenia.

### ■ Predisposing factors

**Genetic:** Research has shown that vulnerability to schizophrenia is affected by genetic factors. The average chance of developing schizophrenia is about 1 in 100. However, if one parent has schizophrenia, the chances that the child will develop it as an adult rise to 1 in 10. If both parents have it, the risk rises to a 4 in 10 chance. If an identical twin has the illness the risk to the other twin is nearly 1 in 2. However, over 60% of people with schizophrenia have no close family history with the disorder.

**Brain chemicals and structure:** Research has shown that schizophrenia is accompanied by subtle changes in the chemicals in the brain. These chemicals are called neurotransmitters and they allow nerve cells in the brain to do their jobs. A popular idea is that there is too much of one chemical called dopamine. Some forms of medication appear to correct that chemical imbalance. It is now well established that abnormalities in the brain are present in a large number of people with schizophrenia. Their brains are often 5 per cent smaller with slightly larger ventricles (the fluid-filled spaces in the middle of the brain).

**Other studies:** Other research has suggested problems may start at a very early stage of the brain's development in the embryo or foetus, or be associated with birth difficulties.

### ■ Trigger factors

**Stress:** appears to be a factor in setting off an attack if somebody has a predisposition to schizophrenia. Stress can include adverse life events such as losing a job, a bereavement, loss of a relationship, or moving away from home.

**High expressed emotion:** There is firm evidence that living in an environment where there is a great deal of expressed emotion is damaging to the schizophrenic's mental health. High expressed emotion means critical comments, hostility and emotional over-involvement with over-protectiveness and high expectations of close contact. Families and carers should be aiming for low expressed emotion, which means acceptance of the illness, tolerance and low-level intrusiveness, allowing the patient ample personal space.

**Drug and alcohol abuse:** Some drugs, especially stimulants, such as amphetamine and cocaine, or hallucinogenics, can trigger episodes.

**Hormonal upheavals:** Often in women after puberty, childbirth, or less frequently menopause.