

Cannabis & Schizophrenia

What Schizophrenia is

- It is a mental illness that affects one person in every hundred.
- It interferes with mental functioning to cause changes in thinking, emotion and behaviour.
- First onset is usually in adolescence or early adulthood. It can develop in older people but this is not as common.
- The onset may be rapid with acute symptoms developing over several weeks or it may be slow developing over months or years.
- During an episode a person may see, hear or feel things which are not real. These are called hallucinations. The people around them do not share these experiences.
- Some people may also experience delusions. Delusions are when people have unrealistic beliefs. For example, a person suffering from delusions may believe he or she is Jesus reincarnated or that the mafia is trying to catch them. Hallucinations and delusions are examples of positive symptoms. So called because they 'add' something to the person.
- Some people may experience only one or more brief episodes in their lives. For other people it is a recurrent or life-long condition.

What Schizophrenia is not

- It is not a form of intellectual disability or brain damage. It is a mental illness just like any other illness eg heart disease, diabetes, asthma.
- Medical research has concluded that Schizophrenia represents a neurochemical imbalance in the brain, most likely an excess of the neurotransmitter Dopamine.
- It does not mean having multiple or split personalities. People who have schizophrenia have only one personality. People with multiple or split personalities have MPD (Multiple Personality Disorder). This is a completely separate illness. The person may have difficulty understanding the outside world.
- It is not something to be ashamed of. It is an inherited brain disease and having it is not the person's fault. It is rarely possible for the person suffering from schizophrenia to make the symptoms go away just by their strength of will. These people need the same understanding and support that is given to people with a physical illness.

What causes Schizophrenia?

No single cause has been identified but several factors have been found to contribute to the onset of schizophrenia in some people.

Genetic Factors - a predisposition to schizophrenia can run in families. If one parent suffers from it the children have a 10% chance of developing it but a 90% of not developing it.

Biochemical Factors - certain brain chemicals such as Dopamine become imbalanced. These chemicals carry the information that the brain processes to make sense of the world so when they become imbalanced the messages become distorted and the world no longer makes sense to the person. One cause of the imbalance is the person's genetic predisposition to schizophrenia.

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June 2009 KM

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Centre for Addiction Research & Education
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What causes a relapse?

- **Family relationships** - some people with schizophrenia are sensitive to family tensions.
- **Stressful environment** - it has been documented that stressful incidents often precede the onset of schizophrenia. People with schizophrenia often become anxious, irritable and unable to concentrate before any acute symptoms are evident.
This can cause stressful situations to develop so it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish between a stressful environment causing or being the result of the illness.
- **Drug use** - both cannabis and LSD have been implicated in inducing relapses in people who suffer from schizophrenia.

What is the relationship between Cannabis & Schizophrenia?

- Twenty-five per cent of schizophrenia patients meet lifetime criteria for a cannabis use disorder, situating it as the most commonly used illicit drug among this patient population.
- It is currently believed that cannabis abuse alone cannot directly cause schizophrenia.
 - It is thought that cannabis use is one factor that can contribute to the development of schizophrenia.
 - It has been shown that the peak age range (16- 30yrs) during which people are more vulnerable to developing a psychosis tends to be the same age range during which people tend to use cannabis.
 - It has also been shown that many people who develop schizophrenia have never used cannabis.
 - Less than 10% of people who develop the illness were heavy cannabis users.
- Cannabis use can prolong the duration of the symptoms of mental illness.
- Cannabis use can lower a person's chances of recovering from a psychotic episode.
- Cannabis use increases the risk of a relapse and the heavier the use the earlier the relapse.

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