

what you

# NEED TO KNOW about...

## Helping Children and Youth with Psychosis Information for Parents and Caregivers

### What is Psychosis?

Psychosis is a serious medical problem where a person has trouble telling the difference between what is real and what is not real. Sometimes it starts with small changes in behaviour, where children just don't seem like 'themselves'. Children or teens with psychosis often have delusions or hallucinations.

Psychosis is rare before puberty. And it starts at different times for men and women. For men with psychosis, hallucinations and delusions often begin in their late teens or early 20's. These symptoms tend to appear later in women, in the mid 20's to early 30's. It is also rare for someone over 45 to develop psychosis for the first time.

### What is 'first episode' psychosis?

First episode psychosis is the first time that a person outwardly shows symptoms of psychosis. These symptoms may be very distressing for youth and their families.

### How common is psychosis?

Between 3 and 5 out of every 100 people will have some form of psychosis in their lifetime. But only a small number of people with psychosis will go on to have long term problems or be diagnosed with schizophrenia. Close to 1 in every 100 people has schizophrenia. Schizophrenia is much less common in children and youth: only 1 out of every 1000 children and youth have it.

### What causes psychosis?

Psychosis is very strongly linked to imbalances in certain brain chemicals (called *neurotransmitters*), especially one called *dopamine*. It is also possible (but rare) for medical problems to cause psychosis (such as brain tumours, Multiple Sclerosis, Huntington's Disease or infections).

Psychosis is a possible side effect of some prescription drugs. Street drugs are a big problem. Marijuana often leads users to feel paranoid. Other drugs can trigger psychosis, too; like LSD, 'shrooms' (or magic mushrooms), heroin, cocaine or 'uppers' (amphetamines).

#### Delusions:

- Are fixed, false beliefs not based in reality
- Can come in many forms; some are quite bizarre

'Paranoid' delusions are common, where children or youth become suspicious of others and worried about being harmed by others. They may also think they are being spied on or followed.

#### Hallucinations:

These happen when a child or teen sees (visual hallucinations) or hears (auditory hallucinations) things that aren't there.

## If you suspect psychosis

If you suspect psychosis, bring your teen to a **doctor** (family doctor or pediatrician) **as soon as possible**. In most cases, the doctor will then refer your teen to more specialized mental health services. Some communities have 'first episode psychosis' clinics set up for these problems.

If you are worried and if you can't get services set up quickly enough, take your teen to a **hospital emergency room** for an assessment.

## How is psychosis treated?

Recognizing symptoms early on is important. This is because treatment is much more effective if it is started early. Because psychosis is linked to imbalances in brain chemicals (like dopamine), medications that help these imbalances can be very effective in controlling the symptoms of psychosis. These medications are called 'anti-psychotics' or 'neuroleptics.'

Commonly used neuroleptics include:

- Risperidone (Risperdal ®),
- Olanzapine (Zyprexa ®),
- Quetiapine (Seroquel ®),
- Haloperidol (Haldol ®)
- Chlorpromazine, also known as "CPZ"

After the symptoms of psychosis are reduced enough by medications, it will be easier for your child or teen to benefit from counselling and therapy.

## Will my child or teen get better?

Ongoing treatment and monitoring will help. It will give your child or teen the best chance of living without symptoms of psychosis. Medications and other treatments are very effective. They work for most people who have had an episode. We think that children and youth who have had an episode of psychosis should stay on medication for at least one year. Studies show that after one year, 7 out of 10 patients who stay in treatment will be in 'remission' (not have any delusions or hallucinations). Most patients (about 65%) will not have few or no symptoms with ongoing treatment.



## When can my child stop taking medication?

Your child or teen may want to come off medication. If they have good symptom control in the first year of treatment, we may give it a try. It will be very important for your child or teen to be followed closely by a doctor. Some people will be symptom free, even after medication is stopped. But after they stop medication, most patients tend to have periods of psychosis, or ongoing symptoms of psychosis.

If symptoms of psychosis continue, then doctors may make a diagnosis of schizophrenia. This is more likely if symptoms last longer than 6 months.

## Helping a child or teen with psychosis

Having a child or teen with psychosis can be difficult, but there are many things you can do to help.

# 1

### Healthy living makes a difference.

Make sure your child or teen eats healthy meals and snacks, gets enough sleep, and regular physical exercise (anything active is good, like dancing or playing "air-guitar".) Street drugs should be avoided always.

# 2

### Help your child or teen to get treatment.

Help your child get to doctor's appointments. If medications are prescribed, help your child to take them.

# 3

### Give support:

You might say something like "I want you to know that I'm here for you. How can I help you?" "Tell me what I can do to support you."

# 4

### Understand that your child can't help it.

Don't laugh at hallucinations or delusions. Don't tell your child or teen she is stupid or crazy for having delusions. This will make her less willing to confide in you. Don't say "it's just in your head."

# 5

### Get support from people your child trusts.

If there is someone that you and your child or teen trust, ask that person for help.

# 6

### Reduce stress.

Stress can make psychosis worse. Help your child or teen figure out what is causing stress. Come up with a plan to handle each cause.

# 7

### Figure out what helps.

Help children and youth to keep track of what helps and what doesn't help their symptoms. Keeping a diary can help with this.

# 8

### Keep things calm and avoid over stimulation.

Psychosis makes people sensitive to being overloaded. If there is too much going on (for example, too many people around), help your child or teen to take a break by suggesting a quiet walk or having a nap...

# 9

### Take care of yourself.

Caring for a child or teen with psychosis is tough and can be stressful. Make sure that you have someone to talk to who understands your experience. Try to take some time for yourself, so you don't get burned out.

## Helping a child or teen with delusions



**Show that you are listening, without reinforcing delusions.** You might say something like "You're telling me that you're worried about the CIA spying and following you. How does that feel?" Then, after your child or teen shares his feelings, 'validate' those feelings by showing you understand. "I can completely see how you might feel scared. I'd feel scared too, if I felt that I was being followed." In this way, you can empathize with how your teen feels, without saying that you agree with the delusion.



**Help your child or teen challenge unhelpful thoughts.** In a gentle way, you can try to show your child or teen the evidence for and against the delusion. This helps your child see that there is no evidence for the delusion. You might say, "I hear what you're saying. Tell me - what have you noticed that leads you to think that you're being followed?" "Why would they follow you?" "Are there any other possibilities?" Ask for permission before telling your child that her thoughts might not be correct. "I care about you - would you be okay if I gave you my thoughts?" "Based on what you've told me, you have done nothing wrong, so there is no reason for the police to be following you."



**Help your child or teen replace unhelpful thoughts with more helpful ones.** "You told me you don't want to feel so scared all the time. Instead of thinking, 'everyone is out to get me', are there other, more helpful thoughts that would make you feel safer?"

## Helping your child or teen to cope with hallucinations

Here are some ideas to share with your child or teen to avoid hallucinations, or handle them when they happen.



**Avoid things that worsen hallucinations.** Help your child or teen stay away from stimulants (like caffeine), alcohol and street drugs (especially marijuana, hallucinogens and stimulants).



**Keep busy.** Hallucinations often happen when youth are bored. They can keep busy by doing things that require attention, like listening to music, reading a book or talking to someone. Or they can get a change of scenery – go inside if they are out, or go out if they are inside.



**Talk to yourself.** Many people say that talking aloud helps. Try having your child hum or sing quietly. Or repeat a calming phrase, like "I am safe, I am okay." Or read aloud.



**For Teens and Youth - use affirmations.** Using affirmations means replacing negative or criticizing voices with more positive voices.

- Say to yourself "I am a good person" (or something along those lines).
- Ask people to write down **good** things about you on a piece of paper. This is so you can read it when the negative voices start.
- Tape record what people like about you. Also record what *you* feel are your positive qualities. Listen to it.

## Your role in your child's recovery

You have an important role to play in supporting your child or teen through ongoing treatment. You can enhance your child's treatment by:

**Record keeping.** Recovering from psychosis can have many ups and downs. You can help by keeping a record of changes in behaviour, symptoms, reactions to medications, medication trials, and important contact information.

**Being an active member of the treatment team.** Be ready to talk with doctors, nurses, social workers and therapists. A child or teen with psychosis may not be thinking clearly. Your point of view is important, and we need to hear about your concerns. Sometimes issues of confidentiality may prevent a health care provider from giving you information. But it is still very helpful for you to give as much information as you can. This helps your child or teen.

**Staying hopeful.** Recovery is a process that is different for each person. Your child or teen may become impatient or discouraged. Be supportive and try to stay positive. Understand that small steps forward may be huge accomplishments for your child or teen.

### Where to find help in Nova Scotia

- In a crisis? Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team, 902-429-8167 or toll-free, 1-888-429-8167
- To find a Psychologist anywhere in Nova Scotia: Association of Psychologists of Nova Scotia, 902-422-9183, [www.apns.ca](http://www.apns.ca)
- To find a Social Worker anywhere in Nova Scotia: Nova Scotia Association of Social Workers, 902-429-7799, [www.nsasw.org](http://www.nsasw.org)
- Kids Help Phone, 1-800-668-6868, [www.kidshelpphone.ca](http://www.kidshelpphone.ca)
- Feed Nova Scotia Helpline, 902-421-1188 (within HRM) or, 1-877-521-1188

### Where to find help in Halifax Regional Municipality

- IWK Mental Health & Addictions, offers programs for ages up to 19, 902-464-4110 or toll-free, 1-888-470-5888 (ask to be connected to Central Referral), [www.iwk.nshealth.ca/mental-health](http://www.iwk.nshealth.ca/mental-health)
- Laing House, offers programs for ages 16 to 30 living with a mental illness, 902-425-9018, [www.lainghouse.ca](http://www.lainghouse.ca)
- Nova Scotia Early Psychosis Program, for those ages 15-33 experiencing their first episode of psychosis, 902-473-2976, [www.earlypsychosis.medicine.dal.ca](http://www.earlypsychosis.medicine.dal.ca)



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[www.iwk.nshealth.ca](http://www.iwk.nshealth.ca)



## Support Groups

- Schizophrenia Society HRM Family Education and Support Group, meetings held 2<sup>nd</sup> Monday of each month at 7pm, [www.ssnsr.blogspot.ca/2008/02/family-members-co-workers-and.html](http://www.ssnsr.blogspot.ca/2008/02/family-members-co-workers-and.html)
- Healthy Minds Cooperative, offers resources for peer support, [www.healthyminds.ca](http://www.healthyminds.ca)

## Want more information?

### Useful websites

- The Schizophrenia Society of Canada, [www.schizophrenia.ca](http://www.schizophrenia.ca)
- The Schizophrenia Society of Nova Scotia, [www.ssns.ca](http://www.ssns.ca)
- Psychosis Sucks is a website about first episode psychosis with a focus on youth, by a first episode psychosis program in British Columbia, [www.psychosissucks.ca](http://www.psychosissucks.ca)
- Kelty Mental Health, [www.keltymentalhealth.ca](http://www.keltymentalhealth.ca)

### Useful books

- Coping with Schizophrenia: A Guide for Families, by E. Kelly, 2001.
- Learning about Schizophrenia, Rays of Hope, A Reference Manual for Families & Caregivers, 2006 - Available online at: <http://www.schizophrenia.ca/szreference.html>
- Schizophrenia: A Journey to Recovery -Consumer and Family Guide to Assessment and Treatment- Available online at: <http://www.schizophrenia.ca/mysql/CPAGuidelinesFinalE.pdf>

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**Disclaimer:** Information in this fact sheet may or may not apply to your child. Your health care provider is the best source of information about your child's health.

Provided by:

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