

# what is psychosis?

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## What is Psychosis?

Psychosis is a word used to describe a group of symptoms a person can have when their brain is not working properly. These symptoms are called hallucinations, delusions and paranoia.

**Hallucinations** are when your sense of sight, sound, or touch is giving you false information, and you see, hear or feel things that are not really there. A person having hallucinations might realize something is not right, or they might believe that the information is correct. Hearing things is the most common hallucination for people with schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

**Delusions** are when your brain is really getting it wrong about what things mean that happen around you. A person having delusions gets false beliefs that they can not be talked out of. Some examples might be to think that the television has special messages that are only for you, that other people can see inside your brain and control your actions or that you have magical powers. Delusions can be scary, or can make a person feel important.

**Paranoia** is when a person gets very suspicious about things that are really okay, and can not be talked out of their suspicion, even when most people would agree that what they are suspicious about could not be true.

## What Causes Psychosis?

Just like a fever or a runny nose, psychosis symptoms can be triggered by many different things. Some of these things are:

- Mental illnesses (such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder or depression)
- Misuse of substances (such as cocaine, metamphetamines or cannabis).
- Extreme lack of sleep
- Extremely high stress
- Other medical conditions (like brain tumours, hypoglycaemia, Alzheimer's disease, lupus, Parkinson's disease or infections).

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## Who experiences psychosis?

Having psychotic symptoms very occasionally (such as when having a high fever) is fairly common and not a cause for concern. However, if symptoms are frequent or last for a long time, this might be a psychotic disorder requiring treatment.

Psychosis symptoms due to mental illness are slightly more common among people who have family history (genetic vulnerability) of mental illness or addiction.

Most people experiencing psychosis symptoms for the first time, which are caused by a mental illness, are between the ages of 16 and 30. They are just as likely to be men or women.

## Early signs of a problem

Family or friends are likely to notice some changes but it may be hard at first to pin down the cause.

The person might be moody or easily irritated. You may notice odd behaviours or see the person's school or work performance go way down. The person might become more withdrawn and less active, spending long periods alone or shut away by themselves. Their speech might be jumbled or they might have difficulty concentrating. They might seem cut off from their feelings or show an unusual amount of emotion and excitement.

Because these signs are not clear cut, family and friends may assume that the person is just going through a phase or using street drugs.

## Why is it important to get appropriate help early?

Frequent or long lasting psychosis symptoms mean something serious is going wrong with the person's brain.

As well, problems in thinking and perceiving the world can have a big effect on a person's life, relationships, school and career. The longer problems go on, the more serious the effects will be and the more it will affect that person's future.

Early intervention is the best way to prevent a person's life from getting off track permanently. Effective treatment can make a big difference.

## How can I help?

- If the person is under the age of 30, there are early psychosis clinics that you can contact, often without a referral. Check out [www.earlypsychosis.ca](http://www.earlypsychosis.ca) for more information.
- Encourage the person to go to an early psychosis service to get checked out. If that is not possible, they could also go to their physician. Offer to make the appointment or go along as a support and to fill in information they might not think to include.

- Call 811 to ask for contact information for services near you or visit [www.healthlinkbc.ca](http://www.healthlinkbc.ca)
- If the person is acutely ill, you can take them to a hospital emergency ward, or call 911.
- Use our family navigation tool to find information and help. <http://www.bcsc.org/help-to-find-help/>

## Other ways to help

- Psychosis is very frightening to the person. It is important to create a calm quiet environment if you can.
- Sit beside the person instead of in front of them. Speak simply and clearly.
- Do not argue with the person about their thoughts or experiences. Instead, focus on how they are feeling and how frightening it must be for them.
- Be watchful. If the person gets very agitated or aggressive, make sure you take steps to keep yourself and others safe. Leave or call 911 if you need to.

## For More Information

Early Psychosis Intervention Program  
[www.earlypsychosis.ca](http://www.earlypsychosis.ca)

British Columbia Schizophrenia Society [www.bcsc.org](http://www.bcsc.org)