

# Schizophrenia and heart disease

People with schizophrenia develop more medical illnesses than people without schizophrenia.<sup>1</sup> One of these illnesses is heart disease.

There are two types of heart disease that may develop:<sup>2</sup>

- **Cardiovascular disease:** A condition that involves narrowed or blocked blood vessels from fat build-up.
- **Arrhythmia:** A condition involving extremely rapid heartbeat, extremely slow heartbeat, or a combination of rapid/slow heartbeat.

## Risk factors

Some risk factors for developing heart disease are the same for individuals with and without schizophrenia. But some relate only to individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia.


Risk factors that are similar among individuals with and without schizophrenia include:<sup>3</sup>

- Family history. Relatives of individuals with heart disease are at higher risk for developing heart disease.
- Age. The chance suffering from heart disease increases with age.
- Gender. Men are generally at a higher risk for developing heart disease.
- Hypertension (high blood pressure). High blood pressure may result in hardening and thickening of arteries and cause problems with blood flow.

- Hyperlipidemia (high cholesterol). High levels of cholesterol (fats) may lead to a buildup of fat in arteries causing problems with blood flow.
- Smoking. Nicotine narrows blood vessels, causing problems with blood flow.
- Drinking alcohol. Alcohol consumption may raise blood pressure and may worsen other risk factors.
- Increased stress is associated with damage to arteries.
- Diabetes. Diabetes and heart disease share similar risk factors. Each contributes to the development of the other.
- Obesity and a sedentary lifestyle. Excess body fat, especially around the waist, and lack of exercise increase all other risk factors.

Individuals with schizophrenia may have a higher occurrence of the following risks:

- People with schizophrenia may lack the energy needed to take care of their health. They may not get regular health check-ups to identify and treat the signs of heart disease.<sup>1</sup>
- People with schizophrenia may not understand the signs that may represent heart disease.<sup>1</sup>

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- People taking certain antipsychotic medications may have the following side effects that add to the risk of developing heart disease.<sup>4</sup>

**1. Metabolic syndrome:** Metabolic syndrome refers to problems that commonly occur with impaired glucose tolerance and insulin resistance. These problems include high blood pressure, high LDL (bad) cholesterol, low HDL (good) cholesterol, large waist size and obesity.

**2. Prolonged QT intervals:** A QT interval is a measure of the time between the start of the Q wave and the end of the T wave in the heart's electrical cycle. It is characterized by a very rapid heart rhythm (arrhythmia). During arrhythmias, the heart muscle cannot contract effectively and the normal volume of blood to the body and brain is reduced. Fainting is a symptom of prolonged QT interval.

## Symptoms of heart disease

It is important to be familiar with symptoms of heart disease. If you experience any of the following symptoms, talk to your doctor as soon as possible.<sup>2</sup>

- Chest pain
- Shortness of breath
- Pain, numbness, weakness, or swelling in legs, feet, arms or wrists
- Racing or slowed heartbeat
- Dizziness, light-headedness or fainting
- Extreme tiredness.

## Complications

If symptoms go untreated, they may get worse, and the following may occur:<sup>2</sup>

- Heart failure. Heart failure occurs when one's heart cannot pump enough blood to meet the body's needs.
- Heart attack. A heart attack occurs when a blood clot blocks the flow of blood through the blood vessel that feeds blood to a part of the heart muscle. A heart attack is considered a medical emergency, and 911 should be called immediately.
- Stroke. A stroke occurs when vessels to the brain are narrowed or blocked, resulting in adequate amounts of blood in the brain. A stroke is considered a medical emergency, and 911 should be called immediately.
- Aneurysm. An aneurysm is a bulge in the wall of an artery. An aneurysm may occur in any part of the body. If it bursts, may result in an emergency situation.
- Peripheral artery disease. This disease occurs when arteries other than the ones in the heart do not receive enough blood flow. It usually occurs in the legs.
- Sudden cardiac arrest. Sudden cardiac arrest is the result of an electrical disturbance in the heart. This disturbance causes blood flow to halt in all areas of the body. A sudden cardiac arrest is a medical emergency, and 911 should be called immediately.



## Addressing risk factors

There are many steps that can be taken to control risk factors for or worsening of heart disease. One step that is not advisable is stopping prescribed medication. Stopping medication without a doctor's recommendation may actually result in increased difficulties in managing both illnesses.

Healthy steps that can be taken include:

### **Diet:**<sup>5</sup>

- Consume less fat. Instead of drinking whole milk, drink low-fat or skim milk. Use small amounts of butter or margarine. Eat light meat chicken or turkey. Cut down on cheese and eggs.
- Eat more whole grains. Foods with whole grains include whole wheat bread, brown rice, oatmeal, and puff-grain cereals.
- Eat more fruits and vegetables. Eating fruits and vegetables makes you feel fuller longer. Fruits and vegetables contain many things that are good for you.
- Eat fish. Fish is good for your heart and mind.
- Instead of using corn or vegetable oil, use olive, canola, or sesame oil.
- Cut down on sugar. Eat half of your dessert. Drink low-calorie drinks or water.

**Exercise:** Talk with your doctor before starting to exercise. Always start out slow to prevent injuries. Have realistic expectations about your progress. For example, build from a five-minute slow walk two times per week to a 30-minute brisk walk three times per week.

**Smoking:** Discuss options for stopping or reducing smoking with your doctor. Your doctor can help you choose the method that is best for you.

### **Monitor and manage your health:**<sup>6</sup>


- Get a checkup at least every year and more often if you have signs of metabolic syndrome. A complete health checkup should include weight, waist size, blood pressure, fasting glucose level, and fasting fat (cholesterol and triglyceride) levels.
- Give permission in writing for your psychiatrist and primary care doctor to talk with each other about your health care.

## Health tips to remember

- Carefully watching your health may help you spot warning signs early. The earlier signs are identified, the easier it is to treat them.
- Reaching and maintaining good health may be challenging at times. It is important to partner with health care providers, family and others to help you stay on track to good health.
- A healthy lifestyle may increase your ability to cope with daily stress, help you build new relationships, and improve your quality of life.

## Learn more about schizophrenia

- **National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)** [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)
- **Brain & Behavior Research Foundation** <https://bbrfoundation.org>
- **National Institute of Mental Health** [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

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1. *National Alliance on Mental Illness. NAMI Hearts and Minds: Mental Illness and Heart Disease. Retrieval date: 02/23/10. [http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=Hearts\\_and\\_Minds&Template=/ContentManagement/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=94413](http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=Hearts_and_Minds&Template=/ContentManagement/HTMLDisplay.cfm&ContentID=94413)*
  2. *The Mayo Clinic. Heart Disease. Retrieval date, 02/23/10. <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/heart-disease/DS01120>*
  3. *Comprehensive NeuroScience. Health Care Optimization: Cardiovascular disease in consumers of mental illness. Retrieval date: 02/23/10. <http://www.dmh.missouri.gov/MHMPP/CardioHCO111207.pdf>*
  4. *Krishnadev, N, Abramson, I, Chisholm, et al. Atypical antipsychotics, schizophrenia, and cardiovascular risk: What family physicians need to know. BC Medical Journal. 50(8), 2008. <http://www.bcmj.org/atypical-antipsychotics-schizophrenia-and-cardiovascular-risk-what-family-physicians-need-know>*
  5. *American Family Physician. Metabolic Syndrome: What is it and What can I do about it? June 15, 2004. <http://www.aafp.org/afp/2004/0615/p2887.html>*
  6. *American Diabetes Association, American Psychiatric Association, American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists, North American Association for the Study of Obesity. Consensus development conference on antipsychotic drugs and obesity and diabetes. Diabetes Care. 27(2). February, 2004.*

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