Approach to Schizophrenia Management

At-a-Glance

Schizophrenia practice guidelines are a useful resource for patient management (Stahl SM, et al. CNS Spectr. 2013;18(3):150-162). In addition to treating the core symptoms of schizophrenia, various coexisting symptoms, such as agitation, aggression/hostility, insomnia, and depression must also be managed. The side effects of schizophrenia medications must also be considered and may include diabetes, tremors, hostility, and depression. Regular patient monitoring is critical to assess treatment response.

Schizophrenia Management

• Optimal treatment requires a team approach.
• At each visit where medications are evaluated, decisions will be based on objective as well as subjective assessments of patient response.
• Physicians will assess core symptom severity, other symptoms (anxiety, mood, etc.), and side effects.
• Patients will provide a global self-report of symptoms and side effects.
• Persistent positive or negative symptoms, unacceptable side effects, or the need for multiple side effect medications indicate that a medication change may be necessary. As much as possible, patients should receive an adequate trial of each antipsychotic medication.
• Patients need at least 4 weeks of therapeutic doses of an antipsychotic (excluding clozapine) before they can be classified as “nonresponders” to the medication. Clozapine requires more time, up to 3 months.
• During acute relapses, multiweek trials of agents are difficult to sustain. However, failure to respond to an antipsychotic in 1–2 weeks should not eliminate that medication from future consideration as a possibly effective agent. Another trial may be worthwhile under more elective circumstances.
• No algorithm addresses all clinical situations that will arise in the medication management of schizophrenia.
• Choice of antipsychotic medication should be guided by considering the clinical characteristics of the patient and the efficacy and side effect profiles of the medication.

Adapted from http://psychrights.org/States/Michigan/ClosingTheGap/Appendix%20I.pdf
Schizophrenia
Recognizing the Symptoms and Getting Treatment

Schizophrenia is a lifelong medical condition that affects the brain. This disorder can change how people think, feel, act, and live. Symptoms can vary from one person to the next, can change over time, or come and go in phases. Some commonly reported symptoms include those below.

- **Hallucinations:** sensing things that others do not, such as hearing or seeing things
- **Delusions:** strongly believing something is true even when there is no evidence of it
- **Altered emotions:** having feelings that do not seem to fit with reality, or having no feelings at all
- **Withdrawal:** no drive or desire to do the things you used to enjoy
- **Lack of motivation:** difficulty staying focused and doing tasks
- **Disorganization:** having disorganized thinking, speaking, or behavior
- **Cognitive problems:** such as with attention and memory

**Schizophrenia symptoms are typically separated into 2 categories:**

**Positive symptoms:** *Behaviors that people usually do not have*, such as:

- Believing that what other people are saying is not true (delusions)
- Hearing, seeing, tasting, feeling, or smelling things that others do not experience (hallucinations)
- Disorganized speech and behavior

**Negative symptoms:** *A lack of behaviors or feelings that people usually have*, such as:

- Losing interest in everyday activities, such as bathing, grooming, or getting dressed
- Feeling out of touch with other people, family, or friends
- Lack of feeling or emotion (apathy)
- Having little emotion or inappropriate feelings in certain situations
- Having less ability to experience pleasure

**Treatment of schizophrenia typically involves different health care professionals.**

**Treatment Team may include:**

- **Psychiatrists:** A medical doctor who specializes in mental health and prescribes and manages medication
- **Psychologists, psychiatric social workers, or counselors:** Professionals who specializes in psychosocial treatments, such as cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) or family therapy
- **Nurse practitioners and physician assistants:** Health care professionals to help manage day-to-day treatment
- **Nurses:** Health care providers who work closely with caregivers, case workers, and social workers to discuss a patient's treatment and needs
- **Social workers:** Professionals who offer counseling and social skills training and can help arrange for various social services
- **Case Managers:** Providers who can help find services and programs that help patients with daily living. They can also help apply for benefits and arrange for training.
- **Occupational therapists or employment counselors:** Professionals who can help find the skills needed for work or school, once a patient is sticking to their treatment and showing signs of recovery.
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Useful links for learning about and living with schizophrenia

www.nimh.nih.gov
1-866-615-6464 (toll free) —The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) offers information on mental illnesses and treatment options.

www.caregiver.org
1-800-445-8106 (toll free) —The Family Caregiver Alliance is a nationwide public voice for caregivers of loved ones with chronic health conditions.

www.healthyminds.org
Healthy Minds is the American Psychiatric Association’s online resource for anyone seeking support or facts about mental illnesses.

www.mentalhealthamerica.net
Mental Health America, formerly the National Mental Health Association, is the country's oldest and largest nonprofit organization for mental health and mental illness.

www.nami.org
1-800-950-NAMI (6264) —The National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) supports people with mental illness and their families and friends.