

PSYCHOSIS FACT SHEET FOR FAMILIES

Your health care provider has determined that your child may have symptoms of psychosis. This sheet will provide basic information of what this is and your options for treatment.

Q *What is psychosis?*

Psychosis refers to an array of symptoms and is not a diagnosis. For example, when someone is told they have a fever they are informed of the presence of a symptom. Fever usually indicates the presence of an illness. Sometimes it can be treated and goes away without a condition being diagnosed. The same can be true of psychosis.

Psychotic symptoms refer to disorders in thinking. These may emerge as hallucinations such as hearing voices or sounds that others do not hear. Other times they may be seeing shapes or images that, likewise, are not seen by others. Often these can be frightening and disruptive. Another type of psychotic thinking is having delusions, or thoughts that are unusual or not connected to actual events. This includes paranoia, thoughts that others have plans to do harm to the individual or others. Thoughts may be grandiose, believing that the individual has special powers. These thoughts may also include that the person has a special relationship with another. At times, delusions may involve perceptions of the body. This includes thoughts that there is something wrong with the body, such as an undiagnosed illness or parasite within the body. These beliefs are often accompanied by unusual sensations or pain.

Q *What causes psychosis?*

Symptoms of psychosis can have many causes. They may emerge under stress or from lack of sleep. Resolving these causes will usually resolve the symptoms. At other times they could emerge due to another condition. This includes use of illegal substances or even prescribed medications. Again, stopping the use of substances or adjusting medications will resolve or diminish the symptoms.

Sometimes psychosis will occur in relation to another medical condition, such as a head trauma or seizure disorder. In these instances your physician will treat the psychotic symptoms in conjunction with treatment for the medical condition.

Psychosis may be related to an emerging mental health condition. These include schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, and some types of depression. Posttraumatic stress disorder will often include some symptoms of psychosis. These conditions require specialist psychiatric treatment. Your health care provider will discuss options with you.

Q *What are treatment options for psychosis?*

Psychotic symptoms may be mild or fleeting. Your child may be distressed but the symptoms do not result in a significant disruption in your child's life. In this instance, your health care provider will want to monitor the symptoms to determine whether they are resolving or worsening.

If, however, there is a decrease in your child's functioning or a significant change in behavior your doctor will want to refer your child to specialized treatment. A change in functioning may be related to school performance, worsening sleep or eating habits, a decrease in concentration or attention, worsening personal hygiene, or increasing isolation and decreasing interaction with family and friends.

The emergence of mild symptoms of psychosis accompanied by a decrease in functioning may indicate that your child is at a clinical high-risk for psychosis. This can only be determined by a specialist mental health provider. Early identification and treatment provide effective outcomes for this condition. If your health care provider suspects that your child may be at clinical high-risk for psychosis, they will discuss treatment options with you. The most effective treatment is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Psychosis (CBTp).



If the psychotic symptoms are more severe and functioning is significantly impaired, your child may be experiencing a first episode of psychosis. This generally means that there is an emerging, diagnosed psychiatric illness, such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression. It is essential that your child receives early treatment for these conditions. Specialized programs, known as Coordinated Specialty Care for First Episode Psychosis, are in many communities in Virginia. Ask your health care provider if one of these programs is available for your child. They are very effective in reducing symptoms and in addressing the deterioration in functioning. If one of these programs is not available, your child should be seen by a psychiatrist as soon as possible. If your child makes suicidal or self-harm statements or threatens others with violence they should be evaluated at the emergency room or at local mental health emergency services immediately.

Medications for psychosis

If your child is determined to be at clinical high-risk for psychosis, antipsychotic medications are generally not indicated. Symptoms are generally mild and can be effectively managed with CBT. Your doctor may want to prescribe medications for associated symptoms, such as depression, anxiety, or sleep disturbances. Discuss all options with your health care provider.

If it is determined that your child is having a first episode of psychosis, antipsychotic medications will likely be needed. There is a specific protocol for prescribing medication to these individuals. Psychiatrists in a Coordinated Specialty Care program will know how to medicate your child. If you see a psychiatrist not affiliated with a Coordinated Specialty Care program, discuss the approved protocols for medicating an individual with first episode psychosis.

Additional resources

- [“Watching for Signs of Psychosis in Teens”](https://www.childmind.org/) (childmind.org)
- [“Psychosis \(Schizophrenia\) in Children and Youth”](https://www.mhanational.org/) (mhanational.org)
- National Institute of Mental Health [Understanding Psychosis](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/) patient and family resources (nimh.nih.gov)
- [Understanding a First Episode of Psychosis](https://www.samhsa.gov/) (samhsa.gov)