How is schizophrenia diagnosed?

As is true with virtually any mental-health diagnosis, there is no one test that definitively indicates that someone has schizophrenia. Therefore, health-care practitioners diagnose this disorder by gathering comprehensive medical, family, and mental-health information. Patients tend to benefit when the professional takes into account their client's entire life and background. This includes but is not limited to the person's gender, sexual orientation, cultural, religious and ethnic background, and socioeconomic status. The symptom sufferer might be asked to fill out a self-test that the professional will review if the person being evaluated is able to complete it. The practitioner will also either perform a physical examination or request that the individual's primary-care doctor perform one. The medical examination will usually include lab tests to evaluate the person's general health and to explore whether or not the individual has a medical condition that might produce psychological symptoms.

In asking questions about mental-health symptoms, mental-health professionals are often exploring if the individual suffers from hallucinations or delusions, depression and/or manic symptoms, anxiety, substance abuse, as well as some personality disorders (for example, schizotypal personality disorder) and developmental disorders (for example, autism spectrum disorders). Since some of the symptoms of schizophrenia can also occur in other mental illnesses, the mental-health screening is to determine if the individual suffers from schizoaffective disorder or other psychotic disorder, depressive disorder, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, or a substance-abuse or personality disorder. Any disorder that is associated with bizarre behaviour, mood, or thinking, like borderline personality disorder or another psychotic disorder, as well as dissociative identity disorder (DID), also known as multiple personality disorder (MPD) may be particularly challenging to distinguish from schizophrenia. In order to assess the person's current emotional state, health-care providers perform a mental-status examination as well.

In addition to providing treatment that is appropriate to the diagnosis, determining the presence of mental illnesses that may co-occur (be comorbid) with schizophrenia is important in improving the life of individuals with schizophrenia. For example, people with schizophrenia are at increased risk of having a substance-abuse, depressive, or anxiety disorder and of committing suicide.