

Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT)

Information for patients and families

Read this booklet to learn:

- What ECT is and how it works
- How to prepare for the treatment
- What you can expect
- Some side effects and risks
- Who to talk to if you have any questions



What is ECT?

ECT is a medical procedure. It's used to treat the symptoms of some mental illnesses including:

- severe depression
- bipolar disorder
- psychosis

ECT can also help people who have thoughts of hurting themselves or others.

Most people consider ECT when other treatments (such as medicine or therapy) have not worked.

How does ECT work?

During ECT, a carefully controlled flow of electricity (electrical current) moves through your brain. This causes you to have a short seizure. You will be asleep (under general anesthesia) during the treatment.

ECT seems to cause chemical changes in the brain. These changes can improve the symptoms of some mental illnesses.

How often will I receive ECT and for how long?

ECT treatments are usually done 2 to 3 times a week for 3 to 4 weeks. This means you could have a total of 6 to 12 treatments. The number of treatments you have depends on how severe your symptoms are and how quickly they improve.

When will I start to feel better?

Some people start to feel better after the first 2 to 3 treatments. Full improvement usually takes longer. ECT works faster than most medicines which can take several weeks to improve symptoms.

ECT helps to improve your symptoms, but it is not a cure. You will still need on-going treatment to keep you healthy and prevent your symptoms from returning. Most times this treatment will include medicines or therapy or both.

In some cases, your doctor will recommend on-going ECT treatments.

How do I prepare for ECT?

- **Your doctor will explain the procedure and answer your questions.** You will need to agree in writing to have ECT. This is called **giving consent**.
- **You will have a medical check-up.** This will include blood tests and an electrocardiogram (ECG) to make sure your heart is healthy.
- **You will meet with an anaesthesiologist.** This doctor will ask you about your medical history. This will help them decide what medicine to give you to relax your body during the procedure.
- **Don't eat and drink after midnight on the day of your treatment.** Your doctor or nurse will let you know if you can still take your medicines with a small sip of water.
- **You will be taken to the treatment room.** In the morning, your nurse will help you get ready. A staff member will take you to the treatment room on a stretcher.

What happens during the treatment?

1. When you arrive in the treatment room, a nurse will put an intravenous line (IV) into your arm.
2. We will closely check your heartbeat, blood pressure, oxygen levels, and brain waves. You will get oxygen through an oxygen mask.
3. We will give you medicines through your IV to help relax your muscles and make you fall asleep (general anaesthesia). You will be relaxed and asleep during the treatment.
4. When you are asleep, we will put 2 electrodes (small metal discs) on your head. These electrodes carry the electrical current through your brain. The current lasts from 1 to 4 seconds. You will have a short seizure (your muscles tighten and then relax). This lasts 20 to 60 seconds.

What can I expect after treatment?

You will stay in the recovery room until you are awake. Your nurse will continue to check your blood pressure, oxygen level, heartbeat and breathing.

After resting, you may eat and return to your regular activities. Some people are able to return to regular activities right after ECT. Others need to rest for several hours.

What are the side effects and risks?

ECT is generally safe, but there are some risks and side effects including:

- **Physical side effects**

These can include:

- headache
- muscle pain
- jaw pain
- nausea

These side effects normally go away after a few hours and can be treated with medicine, if needed.

- **Confusion**

You may be confused right after an ECT treatment. You may not know where you are or why you are there. Usually this confusion goes away in a few minutes or hours. Rarely, it can last a couple of days or longer.

- **Memory loss**

ECT can affect your memory in several ways:

- You may forget what happened during the time you were receiving ECT treatments.
- You may forget events or periods of time from the past.
- You may have difficulty remembering things that just happened or have difficulty learning new things.

Usually, your memory will return in a few weeks or a couple of months. In rare cases, memory loss can be permanent.

- **Medical complications**

There is always a risk of medical complications (problems) whenever anaesthesia is used. Your doctor will discuss this with you further.

Who can I talk to if I have any questions about ECT?

If you have any questions, it is important to talk to your doctor or nurse before you have ECT.

Visit www.uhnpatienteducation.ca for more health information.

Contact us to provide feedback or request this brochure in a different format, such as large print or electronic formats: pfep@uhn.ca

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