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How to stop mental tics

Although there is no cure for Tourette Syndrome (TS), there are treatments to help manage the tics caused by TS. Many people with TS have tics that do not get in the way of their living their daily life and, therefore, do not need any treatment. However, medication and behavioral treatments are available if tics cause pain or injury; interfere with school, work, or social life; or cause stress. A recently developed behavioral treatment is the Comprehensive Behavioral Intervention for Tics (CBIT) Educating the community (for example, peers, educators, and coworkers) about TS can increase understanding of the symptoms, reduce teasing, and decrease stress for people living with TS. People with TS cannot help having tics, and are not being disruptive on purpose. When others understand these facts, people with TS might receive more support, which might, in turn, help lessen some tic symptoms. It is common for people with TS to have other conditions, particularly attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). People with additional conditions will require different treatments based on the symptoms. Sometimes treating these other conditions can help reduce tics. To develop the right treatment plan, people with tics, parents, and healthcare providers can work together and include teachers, childcare providers, coaches, therapists, and other family members. Taking advantage of all the resources available will help guide success. Medications for Tourette Syndrome Medications can be used to reduce severe or disruptive tics that might have led to problems in the past with family and friends, other students, or coworkers. Medications also can be used to reduce symptoms of related conditions, such as ADHD or OCD. Medications do not eliminate tics completely. However, they can help some people with TS in their everyday life. There is no one medication that is best for all people. Most medications prescribed for TS have not been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for treating tics. Medications affect each person differently. One person might do well with one medication, but not another. When deciding the best treatment, a doctor might try different medications and doses, and it may take time to find the treatment plan that works best. The doctor will want to find the medication and dose that have the best results and the fewest side effects. Doctors often start with small doses and slowly increase as needed. As with all medications, those used to treat tics can have side effects. Side effects can include weight gain, stiff muscles, tiredness, restlessness, and social withdrawal. The side effects need to be considered carefully when deciding whether or not to use any medication to treat tics. In some cases, the side effects can be worse than the tics. Even though medications often are used to treat the symptoms of TS, they might not be helpful for everyone. Two common reasons for not using medications to treat TS are unpleasant side effects and failure of the medications to work as well as expected. Learn more about medications >external icon Behavioral Therapy for Tourette Syndrome Behavioral therapy is a treatment that teaches people with TS ways to manage their tics. Behavioral therapy is not a cure for tics. However, it can help reduce the number of tics, the severity of tics, the impact of tics, or a combination of all of these. It is important to understand that even though behavioral therapies might help reduce the severity of tics, this does not mean that tics are just psychological or that anyone with tics should be able to control them. Habit Reversal Habit reversal is one of the most studied behavioral interventions for people with tics¹. It has two main parts: awareness training and competing response training. In the awareness training part, people identify each tic out loud. In the competing response part, people learn to do a new behavior that cannot happen at the same time as the tic. For example, if the person with TS has a tic that involves head rubbing, a new behavior might be for that person to place their hands on their knees, or to cross their arms so that the head rubbing cannot take place. Comprehensive Behavioral Intervention for Tics (CBIT) CBIT is an evidence-based type of behavioral therapy for TS and chronic tic disorders. CBIT includes habit reversal in addition to other strategies, including education about tics and relaxation techniques². CBIT has been shown to be effective at reducing tic symptoms and tic-related impairment among children and adults. In CBIT, a therapist will work with a child (and their parents) or an adult with TS to better understand the types of tics the person is having and to understand the situations in which the tics are at their worst. Changes to the surroundings may be made, if possible, and the person with TS will also learn to do a new behavior instead of the tic (habit reversal). For example, if a child with TS often has a certain tic during math class, the math teacher can be educated about TS, and perhaps the child's seat can be changed so that the tics are not as visible. In addition, the child also can work with a psychologist to learn habit reversal techniques. This helps to decrease how often the tic occurs by doing a new behavior (like putting their hands on their knees when an urge to perform the tic happens). CBIT skills can be learned with practice, with the help of an experienced therapist, and with the support and encouragement of those close to the person with TS. In recent years, more health professionals have recognized that behavioral therapy can be very effective in managing the symptoms of TS. So far, few clinicians have been trained in these types of treatments specifically for TS and tic disorders. The CDC and The Tourette Association of America have been working to educate more health professionals in this approach to managing TS symptoms. Learn more about CBIT>external icon. Though tic disorders were once considered extremely rare, recent studies show they affect as many as 20 percent of children and 1 percent of adults. Despite this, no clear medical guidelines exist for the best course of treatment, and every doctor has his or her preferred course of action for treating a patient's tic disorder. Most doctors, however, start with a "wait and see" approach. Tics often operate in a cycle, waxing and waning on a two-week basis. The majority of tics go away on their own after a few cycles, meaning no treatment is needed. Even if the tic doesn't go away by itself, some patients still choose not to pursue treatment. If the tics are not severe, or don't cause intense embarrassment, most patients become used to them and see treatment as unnecessary. If treatment is deemed necessary, by both the patient and the doctor, these options exist: Treating Tic Disorders with Medication Medication is used to treat some tic disorders, but it's not the first line of treatment; generally, it's only prescribed when tics interfere with functioning and when all non-medical interventions have been exhausted. Tic disorders, like other conditions, should only be treated with medication while a patient is under the supervision of a medical doctor. [What Tic Disorder Looks Like in Children and Adults] Several medication options exist, and it's difficult to predict how a patient will respond to one specific medication versus another. The first drug of choice is usually haloperidol, a typical antipsychotic. Other options include risperidone, an atypical antipsychotic, and non-stimulant medications often used to treat ADHD — including Strattera and guanfacine. Some patients also experience positive results with medications such as SSRIs and tricyclics. These medications should be started at the lowest possible dose to reduce the risk of side effects. Side effects vary for each medication, but generally include things like weight gain, dizziness, problems sleeping, gastrointestinal distress, and headaches. In some rare cases, the side effects can be more troubling than the tic disorder itself — in those cases, the patient is advised to focus on other forms of treatment. Treating Tic Disorders with Therapy The therapy of choice for tic disorders is called habit-reversal therapy, or HRT. In HRT, the individual learns to recognize the "trigger" feeling preceding the tic — in most cases, it is a feeling of "tension" or "pressure" that can only be relieved by carrying out the tic. Once a patient successfully identifies her trigger, she can learn to respond to this feeling by engaging in an alternative behavior — reducing the tension without resorting to the tic. An example given by the authors of a study published in the Archives of General Psychiatry is a patient whose tic is shoulder twitching. "The competing response might involve isometric tensing of arm muscles while pushing the elbow against the torso," the study's authors write. "Thus, the competing response encourages the patient to respond to the urge to tic in a new way." [Self-Test: Could You Have a Tic Disorder?] HRT also teaches patients to identify stressors that can aggravate their tics, and offers them coping mechanisms or strategies to avoid the stressors entirely. HRT is highly effective, in both children and adults — multiple studies have shown a 17 to 50 percent reduction in tics after 6 weeks of such therapy. It's a common misconception that a patients who acknowledges and actively attempts to suppress her tic will experience stronger or more varied tics, but countless studies have shown the opposite to be true. In fact, a study on vocal and motor tics showed that, even when treatment focused solely on vocal tics, motor tics still decreased by 26 percent as a result. Treating Tic Disorders with Nutritional Changes Research exploring the link between food and tic disorders is very preliminary and limited. Most doctors do not advise their patients to rely solely on food plans to treat tic disorders. However, eating certain foods — and avoiding others — may have a positive effect on the condition, with generally few side effects. Omega-3 Fatty Acids: In small samples, children and adults with tic disorders have experienced positive results while taking omega-3 fatty acids. One 2012 study published in Pediatrics found that, while omega-3s did not significantly improve tic scores, they did help with "tic-related impairment" — meaning the psychological distress or additional symptoms associated with the tic disorder. In addition, up to 50 percent of children with tic disorders also have ADHD, which also responds positively to omega-3s. [What's the Truth About Tic Disorders?] Magnesium and Vitamin B6: In a small 2008 study published in the journal Medicina Clinica, children with Tourette Syndrome experienced positive results while taking supplemental magnesium and vitamin B6. The results of the study are questionable — due to its small sample size and lack of control group — but introducing more food-sourced magnesium and B6 will not likely introduce any negative side effects, and could result in positive changes for children or adults with tic disorders. Foods high in these vitamins include green leafy vegetables, legumes, whole grains, fruits, fish, and nuts. Talk to your doctor before introducing any supplements to your or your child's daily routine. Avoiding Caffeine, Sugar, and Soda: Another small preliminary study looked at the influence of certain foods on symptoms of tic disorders. Researchers found a correlation between higher incidence of tics and increased consumption of cola drinks, coffee, black tea, preservatives, refined sugar, and artificial sweeteners — possibly due to their effects on dopamine levels in the brain. These results didn't come entirely as a surprise, since most doctors already recommend that patients being treated for tic disorders avoid caffeine as much as possible. However, this study was the first to link preservatives, sugar, and other sweeteners to aggravated tics, suggesting that further research may be needed to examine the relationship between these substances and tic disorders. A special eating plan will not likely eliminate tics, but reducing stress — including gastrointestinal stress — can have an overall positive effect on the severity of the condition. If you suspect you are sensitive to certain foods (like gluten, dairy, or food dyes), trying an elimination plan may help you uncover the exact cause and avoid it. Treating Tic Disorders with Lifestyle Changes In mild cases, tic disorders can be treated with informal relaxation exercises that help children and adults reduce the stress that can exacerbate tics. Examples of these techniques include deep breathing, visual imagery, and guided muscle relaxation. While these techniques are seldom as effective as formal behavioral therapy, they can help patients improve their outlook on the condition and feel more in control of symptoms. Exercise can also be used to relieve stress, provide an outlet for excess energy and help you feel in control of your body and mind — without negative side effects.

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