

# ElectroConvulsive Therapy (ECT)

This booklet belongs to: \_\_\_\_\_

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As you read through this booklet, please write down any questions you might have and talk with your psychiatrist, family doctor, or nurse.

If you hear or read other words you are not familiar with, please ask us to explain them.

## About Electroconvulsive Therapy

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### **What is Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT)?**

This treatment uses a small amount of electricity to produce a carefully controlled seizure in the brain. While we don't know exactly how it works, the seizures change the chemicals in the brain, helping it to return to normal function.

ECT is most often used to treat severe depression. It might be used when other treatments have not worked or when a mental illness needs to be treated right away.

Talk to your psychiatrist, family doctor, or nurse about any concerns you have about this treatment.

### **Who is ECT most helpful for?**

This treatment is helpful for a depressed person who

- is suicidal
- has delusions or hallucinations
- is not responding to other treatments
- cannot take medication because of side effects

Sometimes ECT is used to treat a person with mania or schizophrenia that has not improved with other treatments.

Some people choose ECT instead of being treated with medication.

## **How is ECT done?**

ECT is done in the hospital. The treatment itself takes only a few minutes. You are given medicine to sleep through the treatment. There is usually only some discomfort with the starting of the intravenous.

An anesthesiologist gives you medicine to put you to sleep for about 5 to 10 minutes. This doctor also gives you medicine to relax your muscles, so that only a small amount of movement happens during the seizure.

The team monitors your blood pressure, heart beat, and breathing at all times.

A psychiatrist puts two electrodes on your head, either two electrodes on one side of your head (unilateral) or one electrode on each side of your head (bilateral). These electrodes deliver the electric current. Sensors are also placed on your head to monitor your brain activity.

A small amount of electricity triggers your brain to cause a seizure that lasts about a minute.

When you wake up, you are in the recovery area where nurses monitor you closely until you fully recover.

Your psychiatrist talks with you about how many treatments you should have and how often they will be done.

Once you start feeling better, your psychiatrist reviews the options for how best to keep you feeling better. Options can include:

- psychiatric medicine
- talk therapy (called psychotherapy, where you talk with a trained professional)
- maintenance ECT (done as a day visit to the hospital, usually between one and four times a month)

## Common side effects of ECT and how to care for yourself

Always tell your psychiatrist, family doctor, or nurse if you notice any effects from the treatment.

Common Side Effect	How to care for yourself
<p><b>Muscle stiffness</b> This is caused by the medicine used to relax your muscles.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take a warm bath.</li> <li>• Do some gentle exercises such as stretching and walking.</li> <li>• Take plain acetaminophen (such as Regular Tylenol) for the aches and pains.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Confusion</b> You might be confused or not know the date or time (disoriented). This can be from the medicines to put you to sleep (anesthesia) or from the treatment itself. This is only lasts for a short while.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tell your family and friends this could happen so they can reassure you and remind you where you are, what day it is, and what time it is.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Memory loss</b> You might not remember the treatment. For days to weeks afterwards, you might also be forgetful or have a hard time remembering things that just happened (short-term memory loss). This slowly gets better.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep a diary of events each day.</li> <li>• Write important dates and times down before each treatment and in between treatments.</li> <li>• Mark off each day in a calendar.</li> <li>• Ask family and friends to help you remember things.</li> <li>• Delay making any big decisions until you can think clearly and your memory returns.</li> </ul>

Common Side Effect	How to care for yourself
<p><b>Headaches</b></p> <p>These can be caused by the anesthetic, the treatment, or not having eaten for a while.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eat something.</li> <li>• Ask for pain medicine before headaches becomes too severe.</li> <li>• Put a cold cloth on your forehead.</li> <li>• Rest in a darkened room.</li> <li>• Listen to quiet relaxing music, or audio with guided relaxation exercises to help reduce muscle tension (Ask your nurse where you can get relaxation recordings.)</li> <li>• Try ways to distract yourself such as counting ceiling tiles, imagining you are strolling in your favourite spot, reading, or drawing.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Upset stomach</b></p> <p>This can be caused by the anesthetic, or not having food or not drinking fluids for a while.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eat small amounts of food that will help settle your stomach such as soda crackers or dry toast.</li> <li>• Drink fluids such as ginger ale or water.</li> <li>• Rest.</li> <li>• Ask for medicine to settle your stomach before it gets too bad.</li> </ul>

## Before your first ECT treatment

Your psychiatrist explains the treatment to you in detail and asks you to sign a consent form. Before you sign, ask any questions and talk about any concerns you have about this treatment.

	If in the hospital	If at home
Blood tests	A technician comes to the unit to take blood samples	Your doctor gives you a form (requisition) to take to a laboratory in the community for blood tests and the ECG.
Electrocardiogram (E.C.G.)	A technician comes to the unit to do this.	
Anesthesia	An anesthesiologist comes to the unit to meet with you.	The Pre-Admission Clinic calls you to make an appointment with an anesthesiologist.
Treatment time	Your nurse lets you know when you are going for treatment.	The Booking office calls with the date and time of when to come to the hospital, as well as where to go.

## Preparing in the Hospital for ECT

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### The night before...

- Take a shower or bath. This can help you relax and sleep.
- Wash and dry your hair. Clean hair conducts the electric current better.
- Remove all nail polish and make-up.
- Do not eat or drink anything after 12:00AM midnight.  
No candy, gum, water, even medication (unless your doctor has told you differently).  
Your stomach must be empty so that if you do feel sick or throw up during or after the treatment, you are less likely to choke or accidentally breathe in fluids (called aspirating).

### The morning of...

- Change into hospital gown and pants. (We don't want to get your clothes dirty.)
- Make sure you have a hospital identification bracelet and, if applicable, a red allergy bracelet on your wrist.  
If you removed the bracelet(s) out on pass, ask at the nurses station for a new one before leaving the unit for treatment.
- Remove all jewelry. Ask your nurse to lock your valuables in a safe place at the nursing station.
- Your nurse checks your blood pressure, pulse, breathing rate, and temperature.
- About 90 minutes before your scheduled treatment time, we might give you medication with a small sip of water.

#### Remember

No food, drink, or medications until after your treatment.  
No gum, candy, or water.



- About 15 minutes before your scheduled treatment time, you are taken to the treatment area.

If needed, bring a case for your glasses or contacts, and one for your dentures.

- An intravenous is inserted in one of your arms.
- Before you get the anesthetic, we ask you to:
  - Go to the bathroom and empty your bladder (go pee). This helps avoid wetting yourself during treatment.
  - Remove your glasses or contact lenses and put them in their case.
  - Remove your dentures and put them in their case.

### **After ECT treatment...**

You wake up in the Recovery Room (also called Post-Anaesthetic Care Unit or PACU).

Expect to stay in the Recovery Room for at least 1 hour.

During this time:

- You get oxygen either by mask or nasal prongs.
- Every 5 to 10 minutes, we check:
  - your blood pressure, pulse, and breathing
  - how you are thinking by asking you your name and where you are
  - your muscle strength by asking you to squeeze our hands and lift your head of the pillow
- Your intravenous is removed.

Back on the unit

- You are helped to bed.
- Your nurse checks you regularly.
- Once you are fully awake, you can get up, get dressed, and have breakfast.

## Preparing at Home for ECT

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- Arrange for a responsible adult to:
  - Bring you to the hospital and take you home again.
  - Stay with you for the first 24 hours after treatment. This is to make sure that you have completely recovered from the treatment and are not confused.

### The night before...

- Take a shower or bath. This can help you relax and sleep.
- Wash and dry your hair. Clean hair conducts the electric current better.
- Remove all nail polish and make-up.
- Do not eat or drink anything after 12:00AM midnight.  
No candy, gum, water, even medication (unless your doctor has told you differently).  
Your stomach must be empty so that if you do feel sick or throw up during or after the treatment, you are less likely to choke or accidentally breathe in fluids (called aspirating).

### The morning of...

- Do not shower or bath this morning.
- Do not wear any make-up or scented products (perfume, cologne).
- Leave all valuables and jewellery at home.
- If we asked you to take a certain medication, take it with a small sip of water 90 minutes before your appointment.
- Plan to arrive at the hospital at least 30 minutes before your scheduled treatment time.

#### Remember

No food, drink, or medications until after your treatment.  
No gum, candy, or water.

**What to bring to the hospital:**

- BC Services Card **or**  
BC CareCard and photo identification
- A list of all the medications you have taken in the last 24 hours.
- Case for glasses or contacts
- Case for dentures
- Someone to take you home and be with you for the next 24 hours

**At the hospital:**

You change into a hospital gown and pants.

We check your blood pressure, pulse, breathing rate, and temperature.

We start an intravenous in one of your arms.

About 15 minutes before your treatment, we ask you to go to the bathroom and empty your bladder (go pee). This helps avoid wetting yourself during treatment.

Before you get the anesthetic, we ask you to:

- Remove your glasses or contact lenses and place them in their case.
- Remove your dentures and place them in their case.

### **After ECT treatment...**

You wake up in the Recovery Room (also called Post-Anaesthetic Care Unit or PACU).

Expect to stay in the Recovery Room for at least 1 hour until you are fully awake.

During this time:

- You get oxygen either by mask or nasal prongs.
- Every 5 to 10 minutes, we check:
  - your blood pressure, pulse, and breathing
  - how you are thinking by asking you your name and where you are
  - your muscle strength by asking you to squeeze our hands and lift your head of the pillow
- Your intravenous is taken out.

**At home**, for the first 24 hours after the treatment:

- Eat a light breakfast.
- Rest quietly at home for the remainder of the day.
- Have a responsible adult stay with you.
- Take your medications as you normally would.
- Do not travel alone.
- Do not use public transit.
- Do not drive.
- Do not drink alcohol.

#### **Remember**

For repeat treatments in a week, do not drive on days between treatments.

**Note:** It is important to follow these precautions because the effects of the anesthesia and treatment can last for a number of hours. Someone needs to be with you in case you feel sick or become confused.

## To learn more about ECT

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### Videos

- Canadian Electroconvulsive Therapy Survey and Canadian Electroconvulsive Therapy Standards

Web site: [www.canects.org](http://www.canects.org)

Go to 'Patients & Families' tab.

Videos available in English, French, Punjabi, and Cantonese



- International Society for ECT and Neurostimulation

Web site: <https://isen-ect.org>

Go to 'Resources for Patients'.

Select 'Educational Content'.

Choose the link to 'Videos of ECT Procedure'



## What the words mean

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**Anesthesia** (sounds like 'an-es-thee-zee-ah')

The medicine given to put people to sleep and keep them asleep for the procedure or surgery

**Anesthesiologist** (sounds like 'an-es-thee-zee-all-ah-jih-st')

Doctor who puts people to sleep for various procedures and surgeries

**Delusion** (sounds like 'duh-loo-shun')

When a person has false ideas or unrealistic beliefs despite evidence they are not true

**Electrocardiogram** (sounds like 'ee-lek-tro-kard-ee-oh-gram')

Also called an E.C.G. (sounds like 'ee-see-gee') or heart tracing  
'electro' means electricity or in this case electrical activity, 'cardio' means heart, 'gram' means a print out

A test that checks or reads the electrical activity of the heart and prints out the result

**Electroconvulsive therapy** (sounds like 'ee-lek-tro-kon-vul-siv')

Also called ECT (sounds like 'ee-see-tee')

'electro' means electricity, 'convulsive' means to cause a seizure (convulsion), 'therapy' means to treat

A treatment using electricity to cause a seizure

**Hallucination** (sounds like 'hal-loo-sin-aye-shun')

When a person sees or hears things that are not there

**Intravenous** (sounds like 'in-trah-veen-us')

Also called an IV (sounds like 'eye-vee')

A small hollow tube inserted into a vein through the skin using a needle

We hope this information helps you understand what electroconvulsive therapy is and why it has been chosen as part of your care.

This booklet is in addition to the advice given by your doctor. Not all side effects have been described. Always talk to your psychiatrist or family doctor about any concerns or side effects not described in this booklet.



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This information does not replace the advice given to you by your healthcare provider.

Catalogue #584 (August 2016)

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