



Non-medical treatments for Tourette syndrome

This fact sheet explains the non-medical treatments that can be used to manage tics. Although medical treatments are used to manage tics, other approaches are also very important. If you want to know more about medical treatments, please see our Tourette syndrome and treatment with medicines fact sheet.

It is important to remember that there are no treatments that completely take away tics. Most people outgrow them in the end, and in the meantime, learning to live with them, understanding them and being able to explain them to others are probably the most important strategies for being less bothered by tics. However, sometimes tics can be distressing, annoying or even painful, and then it is worth trying some of these approaches.

Behavioural approaches

There are a number of approaches that focus on a person's behaviour.

Habit reversal training (HRT)

This is the best-known type of behavioural approach and is usually learnt with a psychologist. It involves increasing your awareness of your tic and practising a behaviour that is the opposite to the tic until the urge to tic reduces. This opposite behaviour is called a competing response. For example, sucking a sweet for a spitting tic, or pressing your hands against yourself if you have a handwaving tic. For vocal tics, the most commonly used way is slow breathing through the nose and mouth. HRT also considers where tics occur, what they look and feel like, how long they last and encourage you to develop relaxation strategies. You will need to practise the competing response until the tic is better under your control. It is sometimes difficult to find an action that is the opposite of a tic. However, the best approach will be the one that suits you and the tic on which you are working.

Exposure with response prevention (ERP)

The idea behind this is that a person learns to suppress their tics. When they sit with and tolerate the tic signal, they focus on not allowing the tic to happen. You must focus on the tic signal and wait for it to reduce. Over time, studies show that the signal decreases and so do the tics.

Functional behaviour analysis

This is another form of behavioural approach that has been proven helpful for people with TS. During talking sessions, you work out why you are doing certain things (possibly tics) and what happens after they occur in certain situations. Your psychologist then works with you to try to find alternative responses to replace the ones causing problems.

Relaxation

For some people with TS, relaxation can make their tics increase, and for others it seems to help them decrease. You will only know which way round it is for you if you try it. Relaxation means different things to different

people. For some, it may be listening to some but for others it might be lying on their bed. As stress has often been reported to increase tics, relaxing might decrease stress, which in turn, could have a positive effect on tics.

Thinking about your triggers

Some tics only happen in certain places, and seem to be triggered by specific things to do with that situation. For instance, some people find they only have a sniffing tic at the dinner table. It may be helpful to try to see that this sometimes helps the tic to start and try to change it. Thinking certain thoughts might also increase the possibility of a tic starting, so it can be useful to work out which thoughts act as a trigger.

Learning about TS

For a long time, people did not know about TS, and did not understand about tics or the other difficulties that are common in young people with TS. However, we now know more about TS and as a result, it is easier to describe it to other people. There are many good books on TS and organisations such as the Tourettes Action have regular meetings, a website and a telephone line you can call to find out more information. Learning about your TS and sharing the information with teachers, other family members and friends can help to develop their understanding.

Where to get help

It might be best to discuss behavioural approaches with your doctor (GP or paediatrician) if you would like a referral to a health professional who can try some of these approaches. For many people, there is no particular strategy that works all the time, in all places and for every tic. Sometimes it is better to accept that the tics are an important and special part of you and see how you can accept them into your life.

Support group

Tourettes Action

Helpline: 0845 458 1252 - Monday to Friday from 9am to 5pm

Web: www.tourettes-action.org.uk

Further reading

You might find the following books helpful - you can order them from your local library if they don't have them in stock.

Buffolano S (2008) Coping with Tourette Syndrome: A Workbook to Help Kids with Tic Disorders.

Instant Help Books. ISBN 1 572 246 324, Ideal for children aged 5 to 12 years.

Cara Verdellen et al (2011) Tics: workbook for parents. Boom Publishers. Available online at www.uitgeverijboom.nl/upload/Tics_Workbook_for_parents_EN.pdf Ideal for children aged 8 to 13 years.

Woods DW (2008) Managing Tourette Syndrome. OUP USA. ISBN 0 195 341 295. Ideal for children aged 13 or older.



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