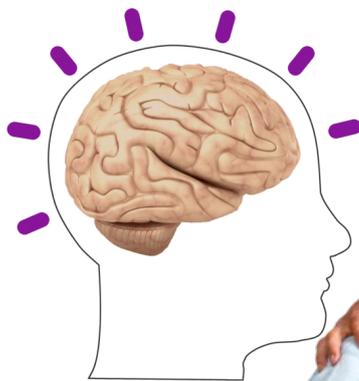


# Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)

For people who might have it  
and their friends and families



▲ ECT treatment room



**Easy read booklet**

# Who we are and what this booklet tells you about



We are the **Royal College of Psychiatrists**.



We do work to help people with **mental illness, learning disabilities** and **developmental disorders**.



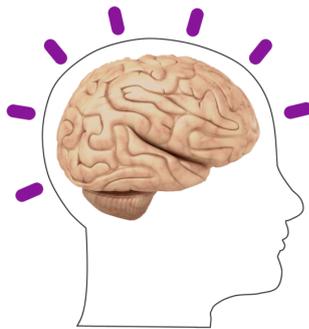
**Mental illness** is when you have problems that affect how you think, feel and behave.

**Learning disabilities** are problems that affect how you learn new things.

**Developmental disorders** affect how you grow, learn and behave.



This booklet tells you about **electroconvulsive therapy** for people who might have it and their friends and families.



The word **electroconvulsive** has 2 parts.

1. **Electro** means electricity.
2. **Convulsive** means having a **fit**. When you have a **fit**, your body goes stiff and shakes.



Electroconvulsive therapy is a treatment where electricity is sent through your brain which makes a fit happen.



It is sometimes used to help some types of **severe** mental illness. **Severe** means very bad.



Electroconvulsive therapy is called **ECT** for short. We call it ECT in this booklet.

# About the information in this booklet



This booklet tells you information about ECT. It doesn't give you advice about ECT.



You shouldn't make any decisions about ECT just because of the information you read in this booklet.



You should listen to your doctor and read different information about ECT to help you decide what is best for you.



If you have any questions or you are worried about your health, talk to your doctor.

**Disclaimer**

This leaflet provides information, not advice.

The content in this leaflet is provided for general information only. It is not intended to, and does not, amount to advice which you should rely on. It is not in any way an alternative to specific advice.

You must therefore obtain the relevant professional or specialist advice before taking, or refraining from, any action based on the information in this leaflet.

If you have questions about any medical matter, you should consult your doctor or other professional healthcare provider without delay.

If you think you are experiencing any medical condition you should seek immediate medical attention from a doctor or other professional healthcare provider.

Although we make reasonable efforts to compile accurate information in our leaflets and to update the information in our leaflets, we make no representations, warranties or guarantees, whether express or implied, that the content in this leaflet is accurate, complete or up to date.

Click [here](#) to read our **disclaimer**. Our **disclaimer** is our official statement about the information in this booklet.

# About ECT



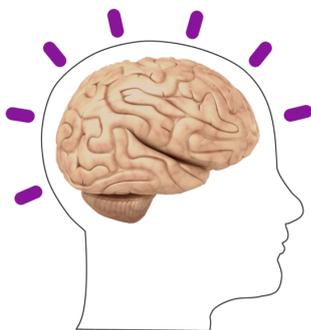
ECT is a treatment for some types of severe mental illness. It might be given to people who

- are very ill.
- have found other treatments don't work for them.

## When you have ECT



- You are given a **general anaesthetic**. This is a medicine that makes you go to sleep while you have ECT.
- You are also given a **muscle relaxant**. This makes your muscles less tight so your body won't move as much.
- Electricity is sent through your brain. This makes you have a fit. The fit lasts for less than 2 minutes. The fit doesn't hurt because you are asleep.



You normally have ECT 2 times a week for 3 to 8 weeks.

## When ECT is used



ECT is mostly used for people who have **severe depression**.

**Depression** is a mental illness where you have a very low mood for a long time.



If you have depression, you might stop doing the things you enjoy.



ECT is sometimes used for people who have **catatonia** or **bipolar disorder**.

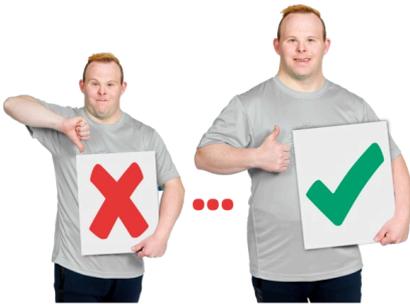
**Catatonia** is an illness where you might stop talking, eating or moving.



**Bipolar disorder** is a mental illness.

If you have bipolar disorder, you might have very low moods where you feel very sad or you might have very high moods where you want to do lots of things.

## Does ECT work



Doctors say that

- most people who have ECT feel better than they did before they had it.
- some people who have ECT don't feel any different.
- a few people who have ECT feel worse.



There is **research** that says ECT works better for severe depression than other treatments.



**Research** is work done to find out new information about a subject.



ECT can help people who are very ill get well enough to have other treatments.

Half of people who get well after they have ECT stay well for at least a year.



People who have ECT are less likely to die by **suicide** than people with the same problems who don't have ECT.

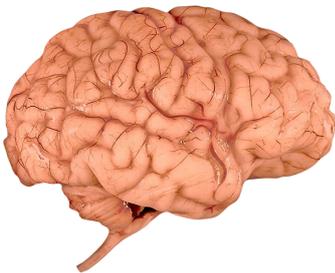
**Suicide** means you end your own life.



People who go to hospital because of depression are less likely to die if they have ECT.

This might be because

- ECT helps people get better.
- people who have ECT get lots of special care.



## How does ECT work

Research shows that if you are ill, ECT can have a good effect on your brain.



Research is being done to try to find out more about how ECT works.



▲ ECT equipment

## Different types of ECT

ECT has changed over the years and got better.



This means you are less likely to have **side effects**.

**Side effects** are when a medicine or treatment makes you feel bad.

There are 2 types of ECT.



1. **Bilateral ECT**. Electricity passes across your head between your **temples**. Your **temples** are the flat areas on each side of your head in front of the top of your ear

2. **Unilateral ECT**. Electricity passes between your right temple and the top of your head.

## ECT and children

ECT is not used on children who are less than 11 years old.



It is unusual for children who are 11 to 18 years old to have illnesses that need to be treated by ECT. If they do, ECT is sometimes used.

# What happens when you have ECT



You have ECT in hospital. You normally have it in a group of rooms called an **ECT suite**.



▲ ECT suite

An ECT suite should have

- a room to wait before your treatment.
- a room where you have your treatment.
- a room to **recover** after your treatment until you feel well enough to leave. **Recover** means get back to normal.



If you have **physical** health problems, you might have ECT in a different hospital with more people to support you, or in an **operating theatre**.



**Physical** means health problems that affect your body.

An **operating theatre** is a room in a hospital where operations happen.

You might have ECT as



- a **day patient**. **Day patients** are people who come to hospital for an appointment but don't stay overnight.
- an **inpatient**. **Inpatients** are people who stay in hospital overnight.



If you have ECT as a day patient, you must choose an adult to come with you and take you home after your treatment.



Make sure you tell the hospital the name of the adult.



ECT staff with special training look after you when you have ECT. Talk to them if you are worried or have any questions.

## How to get ready to have ECT



In the days before you have ECT, you will have tests done to make sure it's safe for you to have a general anaesthetic.



If the tests show it's not safe to give you a general anaesthetic, you won't be able to have ECT.



You must not eat or drink anything for at least 6 hours before you have ECT.



You might be allowed to sip water up to 2 hours before.



If you need to take medicines, ask the ECT staff if you should still do this.

## On the day you have ECT



▲ ECT waiting rooms

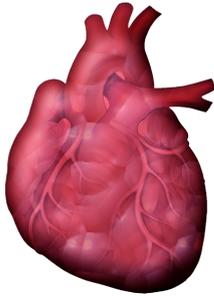


- You go to the ECT suite.  
If you are a day patient, you will go there with the adult you have chosen to come with you.  
If you are an inpatient, you will be taken there by ECT staff.  
Many ECT suites say it's OK for your family to stay in the waiting room while you have ECT.
- ECT staff will do checks to make sure it's OK for you to have ECT.
- ECT staff will ask about your memory and how good it is. You will be asked this every time you have ECT.
- If you decided to have ECT yourself, ECT staff will make sure you still want it and ask if you have any questions.



▲ ECT treatment rooms

- When you are ready, you will be taken to the treatment room.



- You will be connected to equipment that will check your heart and blood.



- You will be given an oxygen mask which gives you oxygen to breathe in.



- A doctor will give you a general anaesthetic by putting a **needle** into the back of your hand.



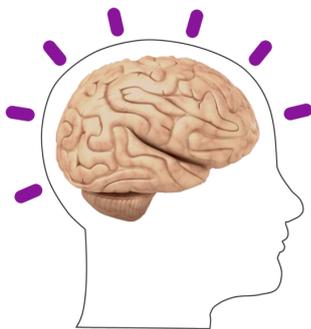
A **needle** is used to put medicine into your body.



## When you are asleep



▲ ECT machine



- A doctor will give you a muscle relaxant.
- A mouth guard will be put in your mouth to protect your teeth.
- 2 metal discs will be put on your head.  
For **bilateral ECT** a disc goes on each side of your head.  
For **unilateral ECT** both discs go on the same side of your head.
- The ECT machine will send electricity to your brain. Each time this happens it lasts for 3 to 8 seconds.
- You will be given enough electricity to make you have a fit. The fit usually lasts for about 40 seconds but can last for up to 2 minutes.
- The fit will make your body go stiff and twitch. The muscle relaxant makes your body twitch less.
- The ECT staff will check what is happening to you and make any changes that are needed.



## When you wake up

- The muscle relaxant will stop working after a few minutes.



- When you start to wake up, you will be taken to the recovery room. A nurse will look after you in the recovery room.

▲ ECT recovery rooms



- The nurse will take your blood pressure and ask you easy questions to check how awake you are.



- A small monitor will be on your finger to check how much oxygen you have in your blood. You might wake up with an oxygen mask on.



- It might take a while to wake up. At first, you might not know where you are. After about half an hour you should feel normal.



- Most ECT suites will have a room where you can sit and have a drink, like a cup of tea.



- When you are well enough, you can leave the ECT suite.



- It takes about an hour from when you arrive to when you leave.



- You **shouldn't** drink alcohol or sign legal documents for 24 hours after you have ECT.



- You **should** have an adult with you for 24 hours after you have ECT.



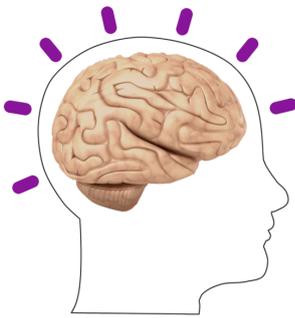
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## How many times you have ECT

- You usually have ECT 2 times a week with a few days between each treatment.
- You will have the right number of treatments for you. This might be about 10 but it could be less or more.
- You might need a few treatments before you start to feel better.
- If you don't start to feel better after 6 treatments, your doctor will think about your ECT treatment plan and decide if it needs to change.
- Once a week, your medical team will check how your treatments are going and if you have any side effects.
- Your medical team will ask about your memory and keep testing it.
- You will stop having ECT when you feel better or if you say you don't want it anymore and can understand this decision.

## When you finish ECT



- ECT is one part of getting better.

It should help you feel well enough to have other types of treatment or support.

- You will usually start or carry on having medicines when you finish ECT.

- Sometimes you will carry on having ECT to help you not get ill again.

- You might have **talking therapies** when you finish ECT.

**Talking therapies** are when you talk to an expert about your thoughts, feelings and how you behave.

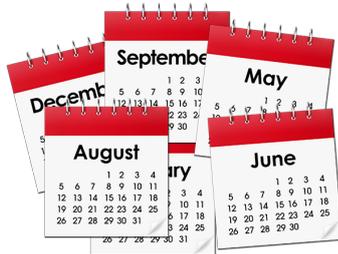
- You will be contacted after you finish ECT to check how your memory is.

If you are having problems with your memory, you can have tests to check what is happening.

# Side effects of ECT



Some side effects of ECT don't last for very long. These are called **short-term** side effects.



Some side effects of ECT last for a long time. These are called **long-term** side effects.

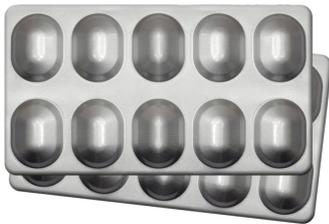


Some people are more likely to get side effects than others, including

- women.
- older people.



If you get side effects when you have ECT, the treatment can be changed to help stop them happening.



## Short-term side effects

Straight after you have ECT you might

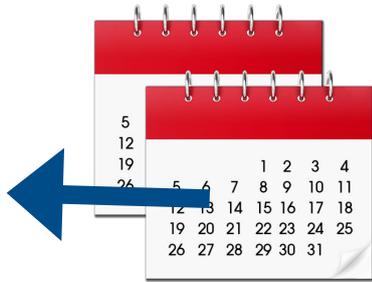
- have a headache.
- have aching muscles.
- feel tired.
- feel confused.
- feel sick.

The ECT nurse can help you. They can give you a medicine like paracetamol.

Just less than half of people have problems with their memory while they are having ECT.

Some people said they had memory problems before starting ECT.

For these people, we don't know if their memory problems are because of ECT or not.



For most people who have ECT, their memory problems stop in less than 2 months.



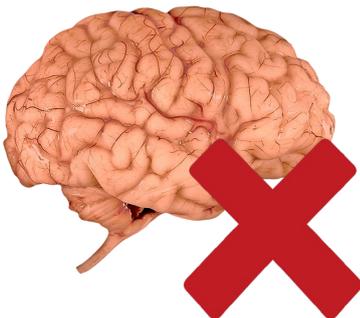
Sometimes ECT can make you have a long fit. This is **very rare** which means it hardly ever happens.

If this happens, the ECT staff will help straight away.



## Long-term side effects

Lots of research has been done about the long-term side effects of ECT.



There is no research that says that ECT gives people **brain damage**.

**Brain damage** is when your brain is hurt and doesn't work properly anymore.



The most serious long-term side effect of ECT is that you might forget things that happened to you before you had ECT.



Sometimes this side effect goes away, but sometimes it doesn't and you lose some memories forever. It is unusual for this to happen.



## If you don't have ECT

If you **don't** have ECT, you might

- stay very unwell for a long time.
- get a serious physical illness because you aren't eating or drinking.
- be more likely to die by suicide.



## Driving and ECT

If you are ill enough to need ECT, you shouldn't drive.



You shouldn't drive while you are having ECT treatments.



After you finish ECT, it might be a while before you can drive again.



Your doctor will help to decide when.

# Deciding about ECT



## Consent

If you decide to have ECT, you will be asked to give your **consent**.



**Consent** is when you officially agree to do something.



You will be given a consent form to sign.



You can **withdraw your consent** to have ECT. **Withdraw your consent** means you don't agree to do something anymore.



## Can ECT be given without your consent

If you are very unwell, you might not be able to decide about having ECT.



This is called **lacking capacity**.

If this happens, you might be given ECT without your consent.



Click [here](#) to read more about consent and ECT.

# About this booklet



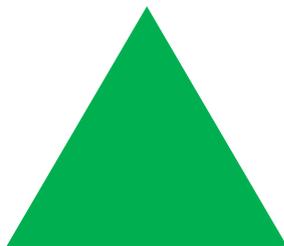
This booklet is an Easy Read summary version. A **summary** means a shorter version.



The full version of this booklet is called **Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)**. Click [here](#) to read the full version.



The information in the full version was written in March 2022. It shows the best information there was at that time.



Thank you to the **Herefordshire and Worcestershire Health and Care NHS Trust** for the ECT suite images.

Thank you to A2i for the words  
[www.a2i.co.uk](http://www.a2i.co.uk) (reference 35424)