



Talking to Individuals and Families About Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT)

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is an effective medical treatment that is most commonly used with individuals who have serious mental illness (SMI), such as major depression or bipolar disorder. ECT is an option when an individual does not respond to other treatments.¹

Why Might Someone Need ECT?

16-17%

Response rate of most commonly used antidepressants

70-90%

Response rate of ECT

ECT is most often used in refractory depression, which is also called treatment-resistant depression. While the most commonly used antidepressants have a response rate of 16% to 17%, **ECT has a response rate of 70% to 90%.**²⁻⁷ Data show that among psychiatric inpatients, ECT is associated with a 46% lower risk of 30-day readmission compared with a similar group of patients who had severe depression and did not receive ECT.⁸

Overall, ECT is a safe and highly effective treatment for SMI that has not responded to other treatment approaches.² However it is underutilized. **In 2014, less than 1% of patients received ECT treatment** – this is due to a combination of factors that includes stigma and misinformation, the potential for cognitive side-effects, and limited availability and restrictions in some areas.⁹ As you seek effective treatment options for patients who have poor response rates to mainstream approaches, it is appropriate to include ECT in the discussion.



Possible Positive Outcomes

ECT is a viable choice for individuals who have tried pharmaceutical options without success. **Remarkably, 70 to 90%²⁻⁷ of individuals feel improvement in their depression.** This is something that should encourage individuals and families as they consider treatment options.

It is important for individuals to know that even if they receive ECT treatments, their treatment plan may also still include antidepressant medications to prevent relapse. This can likely help them feel symptom relief faster than with medications alone.



Possible Negative Outcomes

Possible side effects of ECT treatment are headache and muscle aches or soreness, which are typically treated with over-the-counter pain relievers. There may be some short-term memory loss and cognitive difficulty during the course of treatment.

For individuals with heart disease, ECT may not be a good choice. There are also the standard potential risks associated with anesthesia to consider. However, these issues are addressed during pre-screening.

Discussing ECT With Your Patients and Their Families

ECT can be an intimidating treatment option to consider. That makes it important for clinicians to share accurate information with patients in a reassuring manner.

Because ECT has been inaccurately portrayed in movies and literature, there are often big misconceptions about this treatment. When you have an open discussion with individuals and clearly explain what to expect throughout the treatment process, it lessens their fear of the unknown and can reduce anxiety.

Talking points on the process to prepare for and start ECT treatment:

- ✓ Begin with an explanation of why informed consent and pre-screening is essential for blood sugar, heart function, blood pressure, and other health measures. Accurate information and expectations on outcomes start with pre-treatment health screening.
- ✓ Emphasize that ECT is administered by a team of qualified medical professionals. This includes a psychiatrist, an anesthesiologist, and a nurse or nurse practitioner. Reassure your patient that this treatment uses a team-based approach that puts their health and well-being as the top priority.
- ✓ Let the individual know that they receive the treatment in a surgical suite or a similar location. A positive and accurate way to frame ECT is that it occurs over a period of time in multiple treatments. This is what helps create and deliver goal-centered, anticipated treatment results. ECT is typically given in a series of two or three times each week for up to twelve treatments in total. Patients may need some maintenance ECT treatments after they complete the initial treatment series.
- ✓ Explain that a brief series of electrical pulses stimulates the brain and affects the neurons and chemicals in the brain. It causes a brief seizure within the brain that is confirmed by movement in the feet or an arm, as the rest of the body is relaxed from medication.

Talking points on the process that occurs during treatment:

- ✓ They are not to eat or drink anything after midnight the night before.
- ✓ They are under general anesthesia while receiving ECT.
- ✓ They typically awaken within 5-10 minutes after the treatment.
- ✓ They are observed after treatment in the post-surgical suite and comfort measures are provided to them.
- ✓ If they receive treatment during an inpatient stay, they remain in the treatment suite for about an hour before they return to the unit.
- ✓ If they receive treatment through outpatient services:
 - They register and go to the designated treatment area.
 - They do not stay overnight.
 - They need to have someone drive them home after the treatment.



Additional Resources

[NAMI: Information on Brain Stimulation Therapy](#)

References

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