



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 the most common form of managing 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. More details about each type follow:

Habit reversal training

This is the best-known type of behavioural approach and usually happens with a psychologist. It involves increasing your awareness of your tic and developing a behaviour that is the opposite to the tic. It also considers where tics occur, what they are like, how long they last and developing relaxation strategies. It is sometimes difficult to find an action that is the opposite of a tic. For example, sucking a sweet for a spitting tic, or putting your hands in your pockets if you have a hand-waving tic. For motor tics, tensing or squeezing the muscles that are used to carry out the tic might help. For vocal tics, the most commonly used way is slow breathing through the nose. However, the best approach will be the one that suits you and the tic on which you are working.

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 music 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, has a positive effect on tics.

Exercise

Lots of people say that when they are distracted, most often by doing something they like, their tics decrease. Exercise is likely to be most effective if you are doing something that you like, such as playing football or basketball or dancing. Some people find very vigorous exercise such as trampolining or jumping up and down helpful for tics.

Massed practice

The idea behind this approach is that you need to practise your tics continuously for a few minutes,

several times each day. The repeated practice of the tics tires out the muscles and they have to rest. Over time and practice, the resting time gets longer.

Other behavioural approaches

Certain types need input from specific professionals. Biofeedback, which involves recording certain types of body function, for instance, muscle tension or body temperature, has been used. Imagery and hypnotherapy have also been tried in studies.

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 think that this is helping 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.

Notes

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 with 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 Tourette Syndrome Association (TSA) 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

Tourette Syndrome (UK) Association
Southbank House, Black Prince Road
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Tel: 0845 458 1252
Email: help@tsa.org.uk
Website: www.tsa.org.uk

Compiled by the Tourette syndrome clinic in collaboration with the Child and Family Information Group

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