



Patient & Family Guide

2022

# Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) for Inpatients

Valley Regional Hospital



[www.nshealth.ca](http://www.nshealth.ca)

# **Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) for Inpatients**

## **What is ECT?**

ECT is a treatment that uses a small electrical current to stimulate the brain and cause a mild seizure (twitching of your toes and jaw muscle). This treatment is very safe. Doctors and nurses will watch you closely during your treatment.

## **Why do I need ECT?**

ECT is most often used to treat serious depression. It may also be helpful for bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, Parkinson's disease, and some other disorders.

## **How does ECT work?**

- Although there are several theories to explain how ECT works, the exact process is still not clear to health care professionals.
- We know that it is a very useful treatment for people who are very depressed. This includes people who may be thinking about taking their own life, and those who are not doing well on anti-depressants.

- ECT tends to work more quickly than medication.
- Most people who get ECT to treat depression feel a lot better than before their treatment.

## **Is ECT safe?**

- ECT is very safe compared to many other health care treatments (like taking medication or having a tooth removed). Our ECT equipment is modern and up-to-date.
- There are some side effects (see page 7). The chance of death with ECT is about the same as for minor surgery using general anesthetic (medication used to put you to sleep).

## **How many treatments will I need?**

- The number of treatments needed is different for everyone. Your psychiatrist will explain why you need ECT. They will suggest a number of treatments. You may or may not need the number of treatments they suggest. This will depend on how well the treatments are working.
- You, or the person who can legally make treatment decisions for you (often a relative), must give written consent for treatment.
- ECT treatments are usually done on **Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.**

## **How do I get ready for my treatment?**

You may be nervous about having your first ECT treatment – this is normal. We will give you all of the information you need to understand the treatment and what to expect.

## **Before starting your ECT treatments:**

- You will meet with a doctor. They will check your health records, including your recent lab test results and ECG/EKG (electrocardiogram).
- Your health care team may ask you to have other tests before you start treatment. This is to check for any physical illness or disease that may stop you from having the treatment, or to make sure that a pre-existing illness is well controlled.
- You will also meet with your psychiatrist to talk about any medication(s) you are taking. They will tell you which medication(s) you **should not** take before your ECT treatment, if needed.
- You will meet the nurses who will care for you during your first ECT treatment. If you have any questions, please ask any of the ECT nurses or doctors at this time.

## **The day before ECT**

**Do not eat or drink anything after midnight.**

Talk with your psychiatrist about what medication(s) you **should not** take before your treatment.

## On the day of ECT

- **If your psychiatrist wants you to take your usual medication(s) before treatment, take it with only a sip of water.**
- A nurse will check your temperature, blood pressure, and pulse. They will make sure you are wearing a hospital identification (ID) bracelet.
- A nurse will ask you to urinate (pee) before your treatment.
- Remove any dentures, eyeglasses, hearing aids, and/or jewelry. We will keep them in a secure place and return them after your treatment.
- We will take you to up to the treatment room for your treatment.
- An anesthetist (a doctor who puts you to sleep for surgery) will recheck your health record to make sure there are no reasons why you cannot have ECT.
- In the treatment room, the nurse will put 3 small, sticky pads on your chest. This lets the doctors monitor your heart during treatment.

- An intravenous (IV) will be inserted (put in) into a vein in your hand or arm.
- The anesthetist will give you oxygen. They will then give you general anesthetic (medication to put you to sleep) through the IV.
- Another set of sticky pads will be put on your head. These pads let staff watch the effect of the electrical current on your brain. This tells your ECT team how well your treatment is working.
- Two small metal discs coated with a special gel are used to give the treatment. When the anesthetist says you are ready, the psychiatrist will pass a small, measured electrical current through the discs.
- **You will not feel anything during your ECT treatment.**

## **What will happen during the treatment?**

- The electrical current will cause you to have a very mild seizure. **You will not be able to feel this.**
- The seizure usually lasts from 10 to 60 seconds (1 minute). The equipment will tell us about every reaction you have.

- After the seizure, the anesthetist will keep giving you oxygen until you start to breathe on your own and wake up.
- After your treatment, you will spend 30 minutes in the recovery room. A team of nurses will watch you closely until you are ready to return to your unit. Then we will bring you back to your hospital room by wheelchair.
- In your room, we will check your blood pressure again. You will get a light meal and will rest until you feel ready to get up. **It is important to take your time getting up after treatment because you may feel dizzy.**
- You may be confused after your ECT, but it will get better as the day goes on.

## **What are the possible side effects?**

- Most people feel a bit confused when they wake up after treatment. This usually gets better in 30 to 90 minutes.
- You may feel sleepy or confused for a few hours after your treatment.
- You may have muscle aches and a headache. These should get better within a day. Taking acetaminophen (Tylenol®) may help.



- During the course of your treatment, you may notice that you have trouble forming new memories or retrieving (getting back) past memories, usually from the time right before your treatment. When the treatments end or are spaced out over time, these problems will get better. If you continue to have problems, they will usually happen around the time of your treatments.
- Very rarely, some people have gaps in their memory of events long in the past. While these memories are important, most people still believe the treatment is worthwhile to treat their depression. These memory gaps usually go away once the ECT treatments end.
- There are many myths about ECT. It is a safe and effective treatment. Please ask your health care team about any myths you have heard or any questions you may have.

## **Your treatment may be cancelled if you have:**

- Had a heart attack, stroke, or transient ischemic attack (TIA) **within the last 4 weeks (1 month)**
- Recent breathing problems, like asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- Heart failure
- Irregular heartbeat
- Chest pain that does not go away easily

## **Where can I get more information?**

Ask a member of your health care team, like your psychiatrist, for more information about ECT.

