



Patient & Family Guide
2021

Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) for Inpatients



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Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) Inpatient Guide

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 the treatment.

Why do I need ECT?

ECT is most often used to treat serious depression. Sometimes, it is helpful for mania, 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 do 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, or 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?

- Compared to many other health care treatments (medication, dental extractions), ECT is very safe. There are some side effects that will be explained in the side effects section on page 5. We estimate the chance of death with ECT to be the same as for minor surgery using general anesthetic.
- Our ECT equipment is modern and up-to-date.

How is ECT given?

- Before starting your ECT treatments, you will meet with a doctor who will check your health records, including your recent lab test results, chest X-ray, and EKG (electrocardiogram). Your health care team may request other tests before you start treatment. This is to check for any physical illness or disease that would 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 the medication(s) you take. They will tell you which medication(s) you **should** and **should not** take before your ECT treatment.
- You will meet the nurses who will care for you on the day that you come for your first ECT session. If you have any questions, you can ask any of the ECT nurses or doctors.
- On the day of the treatment, an anesthetist (doctor who specializes in putting you to sleep before surgery) will recheck your health record to make sure there are no reasons why we cannot do the ECT.
- In the treatment room, the nurses will put 3 small sticky pads on your chest. This lets the doctors monitor your heart during the ECT.
- The anesthetist will put you to sleep by injecting medicine into a vein in your hand or in your arm.
- Another set of sticky pads will be put on your head once you are asleep. These pads let staff watch the effect of the electrical current on your brain which gives the team information about 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 equipment used will tell us about every reaction you have during the session. The seizure normally lasts between 20 and 120 seconds.
- After the seizure, the anesthetist will keep giving you oxygen until you start to breathe on your own and wake up.
- A team of nurses will watch you closely in the recovery room until you are ready to return to your unit.

What are the possible side effects?

- Most people have a bit of confusion when waking up after treatment. This usually gets better in 30 to 90 minutes.
- You may feel sleepy or confused for a few hours after each treatment.
- You may have some muscle aches and headaches. These should get better within a day. Taking acetaminophen (Tylenol®) can help.
- During the course of treatment, you may notice that you have some trouble forming new memories or retrieving past memories, usually from the time right before your treatment. When the treatments end or are spaced out over time, these problems get better. If you continue to have problems, they will usually happen around the time of the ECT treatment.
- Very rarely, some people have gaps in their memory of events long in the past. While these memories are important, most people believe the treatment is worthwhile to treat their depression. These memory gaps usually go away once the ECT treatment ends.
- There are many myths about ECT. It is a safe and effective treatment. Please ask your care team about any myths you have heard.

How many treatments will I need?

The need for ECT 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 advised. This will depend on your progress. You or the person who can legally make treatment decisions for you (often a relative), must give written consent for treatment.

Your treatment may be cancelled if you have:

- › Within the last 4 weeks (1 month) have had a heart attack, stroke, or transient ischemic attack (TIA)
- › Recent breathing problems like asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- › Heart failure
- › Irregular heartbeat
- › Chest pain that does not go away easily
- › Fever over 38.5° C (101.3° F)
- › Flu symptoms such as fever, new cough, sore throat, muscle or joint pain

Where can I get more information?

Ask your psychiatrist or a nurse for more information about ECT.

Getting ready for ECT

We know that you may be nervous about having your first ECT treatment. We try to provide all the information you need to understand the treatment and what to expect.

On the day before ECT

- **Do not eat or drink after midnight.**
- Talk to your doctor about what medication you **should** and **should not** take before your treatment.
- **Your morning medication should be taken with only a sip of water.**

On the day of ECT

- A nurse will check your temperature, blood pressure, and pulse. They will make sure that you are wearing a hospital identification (ID) bracelet.
- A nurse will ask you to pee before your treatment.

- Remove any dentures, eyeglasses, hearing aids, and/or jewelry. We will put them in a secured place.
- **Please note:** The hospital is not responsible for the loss or damage of any item.
- We will take you to the lower floor of the Mount Hope Building to the ECT treatment waiting room.
- After your treatment, you will spend 30 minutes in the recovery room. Then we will bring you back to your hospital unit by wheelchair.
- On the unit, we will check your blood pressure again. You will get a light meal and will rest until you feel ready to be up and around. **It is important to take your time getting up after treatment to prevent feeling dizzy.**
- You may be confused after your ECT, but it will get better as the day goes on.

What are your questions?

Please ask. We are here to help you.

Looking for more health information?

Find this pamphlet and all our patient resources here: <https://library.nshealth.ca/PatientEducation>

Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazines, and other resources.

For more information, go to <http://library.novascotia.ca>

Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time: call 811 or visit <https://811.novascotia.ca>

Learn about other programs and services in your community: call 211 or visit <http://ns.211.ca>

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Prepared by: Neuromodulation Department of the Mental Health and Addictions Program

Designed by: NSHA Library Services

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WM85-1317 © February 2021 Nova Scotia Health Authority

The information in this pamphlet is to be updated every 3 years or as needed.