

Essential Tremor

Information and advice for patients

Neurology

What is essential tremor?

Essential tremor, also known as benign or familial tremor, is a neurological (brain and nerves) disorder that causes involuntary shaking of parts of the body. The severity of essential tremor varies in different people; in most people it is mild and they won't need to see a doctor about it, but in others it can make simple tasks such as drinking a cup of tea or writing very difficult.

Essential tremor does not shorten your life or increase your risk of other brain disorders as far as we are aware.

What are the symptoms of essential tremor?

The symptoms of essential tremor are:

- Involuntary shaking of the hands, head, legs, voice or jaw (tremor).
- The tremor happens when you are holding your hands out or trying to do something (writing or drinking tea) and goes away when you are resting.
- The tremor may start in one hand then spread to the other.

If you have other symptoms in addition to tremor you may have a different condition.

What causes essential tremor?

The exact cause of essential tremor is unknown, but we do know that it runs in families and gets worse with age. It also becomes worse with stress, a lack of sleep and caffeine.

How is essential tremor diagnosed?

A doctor will diagnose essential tremor by asking you about your symptoms, what medicines you are taking and about any family history of illness. You may also need a blood test to rule out other conditions.

How is essential tremor treated?

Essential tremor can't be cured but there are treatments available which can reduce the tremor if it is affecting your life.

Medication

You may be prescribed medications such as propranolol, topiramate and/or primidone to help your symptoms.

What are the benefits of these medications?

These medicines can help to reduce/improve your tremor. They would be started at a low dose which would be gradually increased until the tremor improves.

Essential Tremor

Information and advice for patients

Neurology

If you feel you only need treatment at specific times, such as before a social event or meeting, you may be prescribed single doses of propranolol to ease the tremor in these situations.

What are the risks of these medications?

The most common side effects of these medications are sleepiness/tiredness and dizziness. A full list of possible side effects can be found in the manufacturer's leaflet that comes with the medications; please read this before taking them.

Botox

Botox can be given by injection into the muscles that shake.

What are the benefits of botox?

Botox can help to reduce the tremor for certain people, and is best for tremors in the head and neck.

What are the risks of botox?

The risk of this treatment is that it causes weakness of the arm.

What are the risks of not getting treatment?

The only risk of not getting treatment is that your tremor will not improve, however if your tremor is mild you may decide you don't need treatment.

Are there any alternative treatments?

In very severe cases where several medicines have failed to help, surgery may be an alternative treatment. This involves having small electrodes placed in your brain which are then connected to a pacemaker box which helps to regulate your brainwaves and control the tremor. You can find further information about this procedure on the National Tremor Foundation website.

What can I do to help myself?

The following things may help to reduce your symptoms:

- Avoid caffeine (found in tea and coffee)
- Try relaxation techniques such as yoga
- Avoid stress
- Make sure you get plenty of sleep

Some people also find that alcohol improves their tremor, but you should not drink more than the recommended weekly limits of alcohol because more than this could lead to other

Essential Tremor

Information and advice for patients

Neurology

health problems. Men should not exceed 21 units of alcohol per week and women should not exceed 14 units per week.

To help you manage with your symptoms:

- use heavier cutlery when eating
- use a heavier cup when drinking and drink through a straw
- type instead of writing

Further information

For more information about essential tremor and the support and treatments available:

National Tremor Foundation

01708 386 399

www.tremor.org.uk

For more information about our hospitals and services please see our website:

Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust

www.swbh.nhs.uk

Sources used for the information in this leaflet

Neurology, Zesiewicz et al 'Evidence-based guidelines: Treatment of essential tremor', November 2011

If you would like to suggest any amendments or improvements to this leaflet please contact the communications department on 0121 507 5495 or email: swb-tr.swbh-gm-patient-information@nhs.net



A Teaching Trust of The University of Birmingham
Incorporating City, Sandwell and Rowley Regis Hospitals
© Sandwell and West Birmingham Hospitals NHS Trust

ML4791

Issue Date: October 2014
Review Date: October 2016