

# Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

## Quick Facts

### What is OCD?

OCD is characterized by obsessive thoughts and/or compulsive behaviors that significantly interfere with daily life. Obsessions are unwanted, recurrent, and disturbing thoughts that a person cannot suppress and which cause overwhelming anxiety and doubt. Compulsions are repetitive, ritualized behaviors that a person feels driven to perform to alleviate the anxiety of the obsessions. People with OCD know their obsessions and compulsions are excessive or irrational, yet they have little or no control over them.

### Who suffers from OCD?

Approximately six to nine million people in the United States suffer from OCD (2% to 3% of the population). It's the fourth most common psychiatric diagnosis and ranks among the top 10 leading causes of disability worldwide. Approximately one in every 40 adults and one in every 100 school-aged children has OCD; in fact, it's more common in children than autism and juvenile diabetes. This disorder affects men, women, and children of all races, religions, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

OCD frequently co-occurs with depression, anxiety disorders, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Tourette Syndrome, and learning disorders.

### What are the most common obsessions?

- Fear of contamination or germs
- Fear of causing harm to others
- Fear of loss
- Fear of violating religious rules
- Need for symmetry or exactness
- Need for perfection

### What are the most common compulsions?

- Washing/cleaning
- Checking
- Collecting/hoarding
- Preoccupation with religious observances
- Arranging/organizing/"evening up"
- Counting/repeating
- Seeking reassurance or doing things "just right"

### What causes OCD?

Using a brain scan called positron emission tomography (PET), scientists have shown that functioning in some areas of the brain is different between people who have OCD and those who don't. The disorder may involve communication errors that take place between the orbitofrontal cortex (front part of the brain) and the basal ganglia and thalamus (deeper parts of the brain). Abnormalities in the serotonin and other neurotransmitter systems – chemicals that send messages between brain cells – may be at the root of the disorder.

Genetics may be a component in the disorder. In genetically vulnerable individuals, OCD may be triggered by strep infection.

While stress does not cause OCD, a stressful event like the death of a loved one, birth of a child, difficulties in school, divorce, or other trauma can trigger the onset of the disorder.

### How is OCD treated?

There is no cure for OCD, but it is highly treatable. Standard treatment includes cognitive behavior therapy (CBT), sometimes accompanied by medication. Many experts believe a combination is most effective.

A special form of cognitive behavior therapy called exposure and response prevention (ERP) exposes people with OCD to their obsessions and teaches them to reduce their anxiety without performing rituals.

Medications called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are also used to treat OCD. These drugs are believed to help normalize the brain's serotonin level.

While symptoms are rarely eliminated on a permanent basis, intervention can reduce symptoms dramatically and provide lasting benefits.

### Where can someone find help for OCD?

- Mental health professionals experienced in treating OCD



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[www.ocdchicago.org](http://www.ocdchicago.org)
- Obsessive Compulsive Foundation (for information outside the Chicagoland area)  
[www.ocfoundation.org](http://www.ocfoundation.org)