Essential tremor
Essential tremor is a neurological (nervous system) disorder characterized by the involuntary shaking or trembling of particular parts of the body, usually the head and hands. The tremors typically worsen when the hands are being used (kinetic tremor), and reduce significantly or stop altogether when the hands are resting. The cause is unknown, although a genetic link is strongly suspected. There is no cure for essential tremor.

Treatment aims to suppress the tremors and may include medication, surgery and stress management.

Symptoms of essential tremor

The symptoms of essential tremor include:

- affects the voluntary muscles (the muscles that you can consciously move)
- head nodding, if the head is affected
- shaky, quivering voice, if the larynx (voice box) is affected
- a small, rapid tremor
- tremor that is exacerbated by activity or movement
- tremor that eases when the body part is at rest
- tremor that stops when the person is asleep
- worsening with age
- hands, head and voice are most commonly affected
- other body parts may become affected over time, including the arms and eyelids (the legs are rarely affected).

Essential tremor is not Parkinson’s disease

Essential tremor and Parkinson’s disease are different conditions. Essential tremor is characterised by shaking when movement starts, which can continue or worsen during movement. The symptoms of Parkinson’s disease include involuntary tremor when you are not moving, muscle stiffness, slowness of movement and ‘freezing’.

Parkinson’s disease is caused by a lack of supply of the brain chemical dopamine, which is necessary for smooth and controlled muscular movement.

Cause of essential tremor

Essential tremor is the most common type of tremor, and affects more people than Parkinson’s disease. Some estimates suggest that around one in five people over the age of 65 years is affected. There is no known cause, but a genetic link is strongly suspected. Each child of a person with essential tremor has a 50 per cent chance of inheriting the disorder themselves. If a person with essential tremor has other affected family members, then the disorder is called ‘familial tremor’.

Factors affecting essential tremors

Certain factors are known to worsen the condition, including:

- emotional stress
- physical activity
- caffeinated drinks
- fatigue and insufficient sleep
- alcohol consumption (in some people).
Effects of essential tremor on quality of life

Uncontrollable shaking can reduce a person’s quality of life in many ways, including:

- difficulties with everyday activities, such as writing, getting dressed or eating
- irritation and stress caused by the inability to control the affected body part
- social embarrassment
- increased fatigue.

Diagnosis of essential tremor

Essential tremor is diagnosed using a number of tests, including:

- medical history
- physical examination
- electromyography (EMG) test to check the electrical activity of muscles
- tests to rule out other causes – such as x-rays, blood tests, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and computed tomography (CT) scans.

Treatment of essential tremor

There is no cure for essential tremor. Treatment aims to suppress the involuntary movements, and can include:

- avoidance of known triggers, such as alcohol or caffeine
- stress management techniques
- some medications used to treat other medical conditions, such as heart disease (beta blockers) and epilepsy (anticonvulsants) – these medications have been helpful in some cases
- other medications, including tranquillisers
- deep brain stimulation, a surgically implanted device that helps to short-circuit the impulses or brain waves causing the tremor
- brain surgery to alter the part of the brain causing the tremor has been successful in some cases
- regular monitoring and observation – if the tremor is mild and doesn’t stop the person from performing their usual activities, this may be the only treatment.

In some cases, alcohol may reduce the tremors. However, this is not a recommended treatment, because long-term consumption of alcohol has significant health risks.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Parkinson’s Victoria Tel. (03) 9581 8700 or 1800 644 189

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- ring NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24.

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Neuromuscular system explained

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- Neuromuscular system explained
- Huntington's disease
- Motor neurone disease
- Multiple sclerosis
- Parkinson's disease
- Spina bifida
- Other movement related conditions

Neuromuscular system explained

- Central nervous system birth defects
  Folic acid taken before conception, and during at least the first four weeks of pregnancy, can prevent around seven out of 10 cases of neural tube defects...
- Neuromuscular disorders
  The combination of the nervous system and muscles is known as the neuromuscular system...

Huntington's disease

- Huntington's disease
  The symptoms of Huntington's disease usually, but not always, first appear when the person is approaching middle age...
- Huntington's disease and diet issues
Weight loss is often associated with Huntington's disease, but it doesn't appear to be a direct result of diet.

Motor neurone disease

- Motor neurone disease (MND) - help with daily activities
  People with motor neurone disease can keep some independence and quality of life with the right help.

- Motor neurone disease (MND) - independence at home
  A person with motor neurone disease may have difficulty with everyday items in their home.

- Motor neurone disease (MND) - personal care
  Problems using the toilet and bathroom can be stressful for both the person with motor neurone disease and their carer.

- Motor neurone disease (MND) - recreation and leisure
  Recreation and leisure are very important for everyone, especially for people with limited activity.

Multiple sclerosis

- Multiple sclerosis (MS)
  Multiple sclerosis is not contagious, but it is progressive and unpredictable.

- Multiple sclerosis (MS) - common problems
  Common symptoms of multiple sclerosis can be eased with medications, therapies and self-help strategies.

Parkinson's disease

- Parkinson's disease
  People with Parkinson's disease can help manage their symptoms through medication and support.

- Parkinson's disease and constipation
  Constipation is a common complication of Parkinson's disease.

- Parkinson's disease and sexual issues
  Communication is the best remedy for all types of relationship problems, including sexual problems caused by Parkinson's disease.

Spina bifida

- Spina bifida
  Folate can prevent up to 70 per cent of spina bifida cases if taken daily for one month before conception and during the first three months of pregnancy.

- Spinal muscular atrophy (SMA)
  A child with spinal muscular atrophy type 1 rarely lives beyond three years of age.

Other movement related conditions

- Cerebral palsy
  Cerebral palsy affects people in different ways some people experience minor motor skill problems, while others may be totally physically dependent.

- Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease (CMT)
  Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease is the most common inherited disorder affecting the peripheral nervous system.

- Essential tremor
  Essential tremor causes involuntary shaking or trembling of particular parts of the body, usually the head and hands, but it is not Parkinson's disease.

- Friedreich's ataxia
  To the casual observer, a person with Friedreich ataxia may seem to be drunk.

- Helping a child with a disability with everyday activities
  If you have a child with a disability you can help improve their communication and movement by encouraging them to take part in daily activities.

- Kennedy's disease
  Kennedy's disease is a rare inherited neuromuscular disorder that causes progressive weakening and wasting of the muscles, particularly the arms and legs.
- **Muscular dystrophy**
  People affected by muscular dystrophy have different degrees of independence, mobility and carer needs...

- **Myasthenia gravis**
  Myasthenia gravis is an autoimmune disease that causes muscle weakness...

- **Polio and post-polio syndrome**
  Polio is a serious disease that can cause life-threatening paralysis and possibly death.

- **Restless legs syndrome (RLS)**
  Restless legs syndrome has been described as a type of cramp, soreness or a creeping, crawling feeling...

- **Rett syndrome**
  People with Rett syndrome have a keen desire to communicate...

- **Tourette syndrome**
  Milder forms of Tourette syndrome can be misdiagnosed, as it often occurs at the same time as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other disorders...

### Related Information

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### Related information on other websites

- Merck Manual
- Resources in languages other than English – Parkinson’s Victoria
- The International Essential Tremor Foundation

### Content Partner

This page has been produced in consultation with and approved by: Parkinson's Victoria

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