

Electro-convulsive Therapy (ECT)

A guide for patients

A decorative graphic in the bottom left corner consisting of several interlocking gears of different colors (red, blue, grey) arranged in a circular pattern, with white lines radiating outwards from the center.

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This leaflet is a guide for people having electro-convulsive therapy (ECT). Your doctor and nursing staff will give you a detailed explanation of the treatment and will show you around the department if you wish. You can discuss any issues or concerns with the ECT staff by prior arrangement.

What is ECT?

ECT is the administration of a mild, controlled current of electricity through the brain which causes a seizure or fit. The electricity is given under a general anaesthetic and with a muscle-relaxing drug, so there is very little movement of the body. This form of treatment is used mainly to treat depressive illnesses.

Why has ECT been recommended to me?

ECT is given for many reasons. You may have had a severe depressive illness for some time and a number of different drug treatments may have been tried without success. You may have tried several anti-depressants but have had to stop them because of side-effects. You may have responded well to ECT in the past. Your life may be in danger because you are not eating or drinking enough. Your life may be in danger because you feel so low that you feel like harming yourself.

ECT acts more quickly and can be more effective than drug treatments. If you remain unsure as to why ECT is being recommended to you, do not be afraid to ask staff, a friend or relative to be present when the treatment is explained to you.

Can I refuse to have ECT?

Yes. Your doctor must, by law, consult you and ask for your consent. If you are unhappy about the idea of ECT, alternative treatments may be available. The majority of people can be treated only if they give their full informed consent. Your doctor will ask you to sign a consent form but this does not mean you have to have the treatment and you can change your mind at any stage. In a small number of cases doctors believe that ECT is absolutely necessary even if the patient refuses or is unable to give consent.

These people must be examined by an approved independent psychiatrist for a second opinion before ECT can be administered without consent, except in cases of dire emergency. This process follows the regulations of the Mental Health Act. Treatment can be discussed with an independent advocate who will help to obtain further information.

What other treatments could I have?

Anti depressant medication may be available to treat your particular condition, and it is possible that some of them may work as well as ECT. Your doctor will discuss with you the advantages and disadvantages of other treatments.

Special information for out-patients

- Please inform staff at reception of your arrival into the ECT department
- You cannot have ECT as an out-patient unless a responsible adult can be with you for 24 hours after each treatment
- You must be accompanied to and from the hospital by a responsible adult
- You must return home by car, ambulance or taxi.
- You must not drive for 24 hours after your treatment and preferably should refrain from driving for the duration of the course of treatment
- You also must not drink alcohol or operate dangerous machinery for 24 hours after your treatment
- You must have nothing to eat or drink from midnight before your treatment. If you normally take medication in the morning, check with your psychiatrist whether you need to take it and if so it must be taken only with a small amount of water
- The trust cannot be held responsible for valuables brought into the hospital.

What ECT cannot do

ECT will relieve the symptoms of your depression but will not solve all your problems.

These difficulties may still be present after your treatment and you may need further help. When the symptoms of your depression are better you will be able to deal with these problems more effectively. You may then find you are able to make good use of counselling or psychotherapy, which will assist you with learning to cope with and work through these problems.

Are there any serious risks from the treatment?

The risks are small – about 1 in 50,000 treatments something goes seriously wrong and death or serious injury occurs.

Are there any side-effects?

You may notice some memory impairment following treatment. Your memory of recent events such as names, addresses, birthdays etc may be temporarily affected. If you do experience any memory problems please tell your doctor and nursing staff. If possible, ask a relative or friend to organise important things such as finances and appointments while you are having a course of ECT. Alternatively, write things down in a diary.

Memory problems do not always occur but may affect some people for a period ranging from a few days to a few weeks or months.

Are any special preparations needed?

Before ECT you will have a physical examination and routine tests such as a blood test and occasionally a chest x-ray and electrocardiograph (ECG) which monitors the electrical activity of your heart. Prior to each treatment a nurse will take your blood pressure, pulse and temperature. You will need to remove excessive jewellery and nail varnish. Loose and comfortable daytime clothes can be worn.

Can I eat or drink before ECT?

As the treatment is given under a general anaesthetic you must not eat or drink anything from midnight. This includes chewing gum, before your treatment unless advised otherwise by the anaesthetist or your consultant.

Should I take my medication before treatment?

Generally no, but some medication should be taken before ECT with a few drops of water. Your psychiatrist will advise you about which you should take.

What happens when I arrive at the ECT suite?

A nurse will escort you to the waiting area. A member of the ECT staff will meet you and from there you will go into the treatment room. In this room there will be an anaesthetist, an anaesthetic technician, a consultant psychiatrist and a nurse. As the ECT department is a training area for nursing and medical staff, students and trainees may also be present but this would only be with your consent.

What will happen when I have ECT?

You will be asked to lay on a treatment trolley and to remove glasses or contact lenses, shoes and dentures if you wear them. Sticky pads will be placed on your head.

This is to monitor your brain activity while the treatment is taking place. The anaesthetist will give you oxygen through a mask and a short-acting anaesthetic injection will be given into a vein in the back of your hand or arm. Some people do not like having a mask on their face so, at your request, this can happen once you are asleep. When you are completely asleep a muscle relaxant is given and the psychiatrist places hand-held electrodes on the side of your head. Electricity is then administered by using the ECT machine. The smallest amount of electricity required to induce a seizure is given. The seizure itself usually lasts from between 15 to 40 seconds. The anaesthetist will monitor you throughout the procedure.

As the effects of the medication wear off, more oxygen is given and you are then taken into the recovery area. Here, you will be looked after by a trained nurse. When you are fully conscious you will be assisted to the ambulant room and offered light refreshments. Later you will be escorted back to the ward or to the reception area to meet friends or relatives. Out-patients can go home with a responsible adult when fully recovered.

Please note that the waiting time on arrival can be up to three hours.

How long does the procedure last?

The time spent in the treatment room is usually 10 - 15 minutes and you will be under the anaesthetic for 3 - 5 of those minutes. Full recovery from the anaesthetic varies from person to person but the whole process takes on average one hour.

Will it hurt?

The anaesthetic may sting slightly when given through the needle. Some people complain of a headache following treatment but a normal painkiller such as paracetamol should provide relief. Occasionally people experience aching muscles due to the effects of the muscle relaxant.

How many treatments will I have?

This depends on how quickly the treatment works. Your doctor and the nursing staff will discuss your progress with you and assess the need for further treatment. Most people need between 6 - 12 treatments but some need more or less. ECT is given twice a week.

How well does ECT work?

More than 8 out of 10 depressed patients who receive ECT respond well to it. The Royal College of Psychiatrists produced a report on the use of ECT which concluded that there was substantial evidence that ECT is an effective procedure in cases of severe depression.

NICE approval

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) is part of the NHS. It produces guidance for both the NHS and patients on the use of medicines, medical equipment, diagnostic tests and clinical and surgical procedures and under what circumstances they should be used. NICE has looked carefully at the evidence and has recommended that ECT should only be used for the treatment of severe depressive illness, a prolonged or severe episode of mania, or catatonia in certain circumstances.

The NICE website (www.nice.org.uk) has further information on NICE and the full guidance on ECT that has been issued to the NHS.

ECT Suites

ECT Suite

Priority House
Hermitage Lane
Maidstone
Kent ME16 9PH

Telephone: 01622 725000

(Priority House is clearly signposted from Hermitage Lane)

ECT Suite

Lydden Unit
Thanet Mental Health Unit
164 Ramsgate Road
Margate
Kent CT9 4BF

Telephone: 01843 234401

(situated within the grounds of QEQM Hospital Margate)

You can find out more about the Trust and its services online:

www.kmpt.nhs.uk

Patient Experience Team

If you have a concern about your care and treatment, but feel unable to speak to the staff providing your care, or if you want some information about local health services, you can contact the confidential Patient Experience Team (formerly the PALS Team) by calling the numbers listed below or sending an email:

East Kent: 0800 783 9972

West Kent and Medway: 0800 587 6757

Email: patient.experience@kmpt.nhs.uk

Complaints and compliments

If you have something to say about our service, please talk to our staff - we welcome your feedback. If you would like to see your compliments officially recorded or want to make a formal complaint, you can write to our Chief Executive.

All complaints will be carefully listened to and thoroughly investigated.

Write to:

Chief Executive
Patient Experience Team
St Martin's Hospital
Littlebourne Road
Canterbury
Kent CT1 1TD

A further leaflet, Your Right to Complain, is also available to help explain this process.

Please call **01622 724121** if you would like this leaflet in a different language or format.