

# Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Children with obsessive-compulsive disorder have repeated thoughts and rituals that are upsetting or get in the way of everyday activities. For example, if children are obsessed with worry about germs, they may constantly wash their hands. Specialist evaluation and treatment can reduce your child's obsessive-compulsive behavior.

## What is obsessive-compulsive disorder?

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is a relatively common mental health problem in children and teens. Your child may have obsessive worries (cannot stop thinking about them) and compulsive rituals (cannot stop doing them). The worries and rituals are disturbing, take up a lot of time, and interfere with home and school activities.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder can be an upsetting problem for your child and family. Your child probably would like to stop the compulsive behavior but cannot control it. Effective treatments for OCD are available. Your doctor can put you in touch with mental health professionals who can diagnose and treat this problem.

## What does it look like?

- *Obsessions* are specific, repeated thoughts that your child just cannot keep out of his or her mind. For example, he or she may constantly worry about germs and dirt, or that an intruder will break into your home.
- *Compulsions* are specific, repeated behaviors that your child enacts to deal with his or her worries. For example, if she is worried about germs, your child may wash her hands constantly. If your child is worried about intruders, he may continually check that all windows and doors are locked.
- Your child's worries are usually unrealistic and illogical. The compulsive behaviors may go on in an endless cycle because your child may fear that something terrible will happen unless he or she does certain things.
- Rituals may occur when your child is under stress or when some life change occurs.

## What causes obsessive-compulsive disorder?

The exact cause of OCD is unknown. It seems to be related to abnormal activity in certain parts of the brain. Since OCD runs in families, genetic factors are likely involved.

In about 10% of children with OCD, the problem may be related to infection with a certain type of bacteria called group A streptococci. This type of OCD may occur suddenly and is sometimes accompanied by nervous tics (specific, repeated muscle movements).

## What are some possible complications of obsessive-compulsive disorder?

There are no medical complications of OCD. However, it can cause serious interference with your child's schoolwork and activities and social life. Effective treatment can help to lessen the impact of OCD on your child's life.

## What puts your child at risk of obsessive-compulsive disorder?

- If you or someone else in your family has had OCD, your child may be at increased risk.
- Infection with group A streptococci (rarely).
- Usually starts in adolescence, but sometimes earlier.

## Can obsessive-compulsive disorder be prevented?

There is no known way to prevent OCD.

## How is obsessive-compulsive disorder treated?

- If your child has symptoms of OCD, we will probably recommend a visit to a child and adolescent psychiatrist or other mental health professional. This specialist can evaluate and recommend the best treatment for your child.
- Medications are an important part of treatment for OCD. Antidepressants or other drugs may be recommended. It may take several weeks for these drugs to have their full effect. When OCD is related to infection with group A streptococci, antibiotics may be used.
- Psychotherapy may be recommended. Psychotherapy works by helping your child to understand the reasons why he or she acts in certain ways and by building a relationship with the therapist.
- Cognitive-behavioral therapy can help your child look at his or her fears more realistically and learn more effective ways of dealing with them.
- For many patients with OCD, a combination of medications and psychotherapy gives the best results.

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- Treatment usually doesn't "cure" OCD completely. However, it can reduce your child's obsessive fears and compulsive behaviors and allow him or her to get on with life. Having OCD is nothing to be ashamed of—it is a fairly common and treatable mental health disorder.
- Call your mental health provider if the obsessive worries or compulsive rituals don't seem to be getting better or if they return after treatment.
- If you cannot reach your mental health provider and you're concerned about these or other problems, call our office.



### **When should I call your office?**

- Children with OCD should receive regular mental health follow-up visits.