

Tics and Tourette's Syndrome

Tics are repeated, involuntary muscle movements. Common examples are frequent eye blinking or twitching of the mouth; many other types are possible. Some habits (such as thumb sucking or hair twirling) are similar to tics but don't develop as suddenly. Some tics need to be evaluated to be sure they are not really seizures. One possible diagnosis is Tourette's syndrome, a complicated type of tic disorder that is usually lifelong.

What are tics?

Tics are involuntary, uncontrolled, and repeated muscle movements or actions that are repeated in some way. There are three main types of tics:

- *Transient tic disorder.* The most common type, which usually goes away on its own. More common in boys, transient tic disorder usually resolves in about a year. Common types of tics in this disorder include eye blinking, facial movements, and throat clearing.
- *Chronic motor tics.* These types of tics generally do not go away. They can involve up to three different types of muscle groups; for example, eye blinking combined with other types of facial movements. (The word "motor" means that muscles are involved.)
- *Tourette's syndrome.* A lifelong disorder that is usually inherited (genetic). It can involve many types of motor tics (eye blinking, facial movements) and vocal tics (different kinds of sounds, such as grunting).

Stressful situations can increase tics, so parents should not respond negatively when they occur. As children get older, they may learn some control, especially in public. Some tics may require testing to make sure they are not really seizures.

What do they look like?

- Practically any type of movement that occurs frequently can be a tic. In addition to the examples above, tics may consist of squinting, wrinkling of the nose, or twitching around the mouth.
- Some tics are sounds, such as grunting.
- Your child may seem unaware of the tic and may have trouble stopping the tic even if you tell him or her to, but he or she may be able to control it for a short time.
- Many childhood tics are a temporary problem that goes away after a few weeks or months. Others, such as those related to Tourette's syndrome, are lifelong.

What causes tics?

- The cause of common, temporary childhood tics is unknown. They may be at least partly genetic (inherited). Stress doesn't cause tics, but sometimes it seems to make them worse.
- Occasionally, tics can be unmasked by certain medications but are not caused by them. Stimulant medications used to treat attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) do not cause tics. (However, some children with tics also have ADHD.)
- Occasionally, tics may be related to or may flare up after an infection with *Streptococcus* bacteria (for example, strep throat).

What are some possible complications of tics?

Tics can be an embarrassing problem for your child. Teasing and other social problems may occur.

What puts your child at risk of tics?

- Tics are a common, usually temporary problem.
- They are more common in boys than girls.
- They most commonly occur between ages 4 and 7 years.
- Tourette's syndrome may run in families.

How are tics treated?

- Usually, no treatment is necessary. Most childhood tics go away on their own, usually within a few weeks or months.
- Try not to pay too much attention to your child's tics or other habits. Calling attention to or commenting on the tic creates stress, which may make the tic worse.
- Don't scold or punish your child for the tics. Even if your child can consciously control the tic for a time, he or she isn't "doing it on purpose."
- Try to reduce stress in your child's life. If there is any stressful situation that may be contributing to the tic, discuss it with your doctor. Also, be sure to tell the doctor if the tic is causing embarrassment or teasing for your child, or if other social problems are present.
- If tics are causing a lot of interference with your child's home or school life, mental health counseling or behavioral management may be helpful. Biofeedback may also improve the situation in some cases.

- In some children, certain medications usually used for psychiatric conditions can be helpful, for example, risperidone or haloperidol. These drugs have a number of side effects and so are only prescribed if really needed.
- If your child is believed to have Tourette's syndrome, we will probably recommend a visit to a specialist in the treatment of nervous system diseases (a neurologist) or mental health disorders (a psychiatrist).
- Most of the time, unless Tourette's syndrome is present, tics eventually clear up on their own.



When should I call your office?

Call our office if:

- Your child's tic doesn't improve or go away within a few months.
- The tic seems to be getting worse, especially if muscles in different areas of the body are involved.
- Your child is having social problems, problems at school or at home, or other issues that you think might be contributing to or resulting from the tic.