

# Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Adult

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health disorder that can occur after a traumatic event, such as a threat to life, serious injury, or sexual violence. Some people who experience these types of events may develop PTSD. Sometimes, PTSD can occur in people who hear about trauma that occurs to a close family member or friend. PTSD can happen to anyone at any age.

## What are the causes?

The condition may be caused by experiencing a traumatic event.

## What increases the risk?

This condition is more likely to occur in:

- Military servicemen and servicewomen.
- People who are in circumstances where their lives are threatened.
- People who have been the victims of, or witness to, a traumatic event, such as:
  - Domestic violence.
  - Childhood physical or sexual abuse.
  - Rape.
  - A terrorist act or gun violence.
  - Natural disasters.
  - Accidents involving serious injury.

## What are the signs or symptoms?

PTSD symptoms may start soon after a frightening event or months or years later. Symptoms last at least one month and tend to disrupt relationships, work, and daily activities. Symptoms of PTSD can be grouped into several categories.

### Intrusive Symptoms

This is when you re-experience the traumatic event through one or more of the following ways:

- Having upsetting dreams.
- Feelings of fear, horror, intense sadness, or anger in response to a reminder of the trauma.
- Having unwanted upsetting memories while awake.
- Having physical reactions triggered by reminders of the trauma, such as increased heart rate, shortness of breath, sweating, and shaking.
- Having flashbacks, or feelings like you are going through the event again.

### Avoidance Symptoms

This is when you avoid anything that reminds you of the trauma. Symptoms may also include:

- Losing interest or not participating in daily activities.
- Feeling disconnected from or avoiding other people.
- Isolating yourself.

## Increased Arousal Symptoms

You may have physical or emotional reactions triggered by your environment. Symptoms may include:

- Being easily startled.
- Behaving in a careless or self-destructive way.
- Becoming easily irritated.
- Feeling worried and nervous.
- Having trouble concentrating.
- Yelling at or hitting other people or objects.
- Having trouble sleeping.

## Negative Moods or Thoughts

- Believing that you or others are bad.
- Feeling fear, horror, anger, sadness, guilt, or shame regularly.
- Not being able to remember certain parts of the traumatic event.
- Blaming yourself or others for the trauma.
- Being unable to experience positive emotions, such as happiness or love.

## How is this diagnosed?

PTSD is diagnosed through an assessment by a mental health professional. You will be asked questions about your symptoms.

## How is this treated?

Treatment for this condition may include any of the following or a combination:

- Taking medicines to reduce PTSD symptoms.
- Having counseling with a mental health professional or therapist who is experienced in treating PTSD.
- Doing eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (EMDR). This type of therapy occurs with a specialized therapist.



If you have other mental health concerns, these conditions will also be treated.

## Follow these instructions at home:

### Lifestyle

- Find a support group in your community. Often groups are available for military veterans, trauma victims, and family members or caregivers.
- Try to get 7–9 hours of sleep each night. To help with sleep:
  - Keep your bedroom cool and dark.
  - **Do not** eat a heavy meal within one hour of bedtime.
  - **Do not** drink alcohol or caffeinated drinks before bed.
  - Avoid screen time, such as television, computers, tablets, or mobile phones before bed.
- **Do not use** illegal drugs.
- Contact a local organization to find out if you are eligible for a service dog.

## Activity

- Exercise regularly. Try to do at least 30 minutes of physical activity most days of the week.
- Practice self-calming through
  - Breathing exercises.
  - Meditation.
  - Yoga.
  - Listening to quiet music.
- **Do not** isolate yourself. Make connections with other people.
- Consider volunteering. Volunteering can help you feel more connected.

## Eating and Drinking

- Do not drink alcohol if:
  - Your health care provider tells you not to drink.
  - You are pregnant, may be pregnant, or are planning to become pregnant.
- If you drink alcohol:
  - Limit how much you use to:
    - 0–1 drink a day for women
    - 0–2 drinks a day for men.
  - Be aware of how much alcohol is in your drink. In the U.S., one drink equals one 12 oz bottle of beer (355 mL), one 5 oz glass of wine (148 mL), or one 1½ oz glass of hard liquor (44 mL).

## General instructions

- Take steps to help yourself feel safer at home, such as by installing a security system.
- Work with a health care provider or therapist to help manage your symptoms.
- Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines as told by your health care provider.
- Let others know that you have PTSD and the things that may trigger symptoms. This can protect you and help them understand you better.
- If your PTSD is affecting your marriage or family, seek help from a family therapist.
- Make sure to let all of your health care providers know you have PTSD. This is especially important if you are having surgery or need to be admitted to the hospital.
- Keep all follow-up visits as told by your health care provider. This is important.

## Contact a health care provider if:

- Your symptoms do not get better.
- You are feeling overwhelmed by your symptoms.

## Get help right away if:

- You have thoughts of wanting to harm yourself or others.

**If you ever feel like you may hurt yourself or others, or may have thoughts about taking your own life, get help right away. You can go to your nearest emergency department or call:**

- **Your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.).**
- **A suicide crisis helpline, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. This is open 24 hours a day.**

## Summary

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health disorder that can occur after a traumatic event.
- Treatment for PTSD may include medicines, counseling, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (EMDR), or a combination of therapies.
- Find a support group in your community.
- Get help right away if you have thoughts of hurting yourself or others.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

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