

## OCD: Frequently Asked Questions

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#### ***How common is OCD?***

Our best estimates are that about 1 in 100 adults – or between 2 to 3 million adults in the United States – currently have OCD.<sup>1,2</sup> This is roughly the same number of people living in the city of Houston, Texas.

There are also at least 1 in 200 – or 500,000 – kids and teens that have OCD. This is about the same number of kids who have diabetes. That means four or five kids with OCD are likely to be enrolled in any average-size elementary school. In a medium to large high school, there could be 20 students struggling with the challenges caused by OCD.<sup>3</sup>

OCD affects men, women and children of all races and backgrounds equally.

#### ***At what age does OCD begin?***

OCD can start at any time from preschool to adulthood. Although OCD does occur at earlier ages, there are generally two age ranges when OCD first appears. The first range is between ages 10 and 12 and the second between the late teens and early adulthood.

#### ***Is OCD inherited?***

Research shows that OCD does run in families and that genes likely play a role in the development of the disorder. Genes appear to be only partly responsible for causing the disorder though. No one really knows what other factors might be involved, perhaps an illness or even ordinary life stresses that may induce the activity of genes associated with the symptoms of OCD.

Some experts think that OCD that begins in childhood may be different from the OCD that begins in adults. For example, a recent review of twin studies<sup>3</sup> has shown that genes play a larger role when OCD starts in childhood (45-65%) compared to when it starts in adulthood (27-47%).

#### ***Is OCD a brain disorder?***

Research suggests that OCD involves problems in communication between the front part of the brain and deeper structures. These brain structures use a chemical messenger called serotonin. Pictures of the brain at work also show that in some people, the brain circuits involved in OCD become more normal with either serotonin medicines or cognitive behavior therapy (CBT).

## What are common obstacles to effective treatment?

Studies find that it takes an average of **14 to 17 years** from the time OCD begins for people to obtain appropriate treatment.

- **Some people choose to hide their symptoms**, often in fear of embarrassment or stigma. Therefore, many people with OCD do not seek the help of a mental health professional until many years after the onset of symptoms.
- Until recently, there was **less public awareness of OCD**, so many people were unaware that their symptoms represented an illness that could be treated.
- **Lack of proper training** by some health professionals often leads to the wrong diagnosis. Some patients with OCD symptoms will see several doctors and spend several years in treatment before receiving a correct diagnosis.
- **Difficulty finding local therapists** who can effectively treat OCD.
- **Not being able to afford** proper treatment.

## How effective are treatments for OCD?

The best treatment for most people with OCD should include one or more of the following four things: A CBT intervention called Exposure and Response Prevention (see page 8), a properly trained therapist (see page 9), medicine (see pages 10-12), and family support and education (see pages 14-15).

Most studies show that, on average, about 70% of patients with OCD will benefit from either medicine or cognitive behavior therapy (CBT). Patients who respond to medicine usually show a 40 to 60% reduction in OCD symptoms, while those who respond to CBT often report a 60 to 80% reduction in OCD symptoms.

However, medicines have to be taken on a regular basis and patients must actively participate in CBT for the treatments to work. Unfortunately, studies show that at least 25% of OCD patients refuse CBT, and as many as half of OCD patients discontinue medicines due to side effects or for other reasons.

1 National Institute of Mental Health

2 Ruscio AM, Stein DJ, Chiu WT, Kessler RC. "The epidemiology of obsessive-compulsive disorder in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication." *Molecular Psychiatry*. 2008 Aug 26.

3 March, J. & Benton, C. (2007). *Talking Back to OCD*. (pp.10-11). The Guilford Press.