

# Essential tremor

## Information for patients

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This leaflet contains information about a condition called **essential tremor**.

Essential tremor is a neurological condition that can cause your hands or other parts of your body to shake.

The cause of essential tremor is not known but sometimes it runs in families.

There is not a cure for essential tremor but if it is significantly affecting your life, medications may be tried to lessen the tremor.

### What is essential tremor?

Essential tremor is the most common neurological movement disorder. It affects over one million people in the UK.

Essential tremor usually begins as an adult but can start at any age. The tremor may gradually worsen a bit as you get older.

### What are the symptoms of essential tremor?

Essential tremor causes your hands to shake rhythmically. This can make it hard for you to do certain tasks such as carrying a cup or tray and things may spill due to the tremor. Some people with essential tremor also have difficulty with certain tasks such as writing or using tools.

Other parts of your body such as your head may also tremble. Some people have a shaking or quivering sound to their voice.

The tremor may be frustrating, but it is not a dangerous condition.

The tremor usually stops when you are completely relaxed or asleep. It is usually most noticeable when holding your hands in certain positions. You may notice that the tremor is worse at times when you are stressed, excited or tired.

Drinking caffeine (tea and coffee) may worsen the tremor. Some people with essential tremor notice that after a small amount of alcohol the shaking lessens a bit but regularly having alcohol can worsen the tremor.

### What causes essential tremor?

The cause of essential tremor is not known. In about half of patients another family member has tremor also.

## **How is essential tremor diagnosed?**

Your doctor will speak to you and examine your movement and consider other causes of tremor before making a diagnosis.

Your doctor will ask about your health and history of medical issues such as tremor in your family.

Your doctor will check to see if any of the medications you are taking could be causing or worsening your tremor.

For some people, blood tests or brain scans are recommended by your doctor but this is not always necessary to make the diagnosis of essential tremor.

## **How is essential tremor managed?**

There is no cure for essential tremor but there are things that can be done to try and improve your tremor. If the tremor is not particularly affecting your life and daily activities, you may not require any treatment.

### **Things you can do for yourself – lifestyle changes:**

Avoiding caffeine in tea, coffee and energy drinks may help to reduce your tremor.

Heavy alcohol intake can cause or worsen tremor, and you are advised to drink in moderation.

Some people with tremor find it helpful to use a straw or cup with a lid to avoid spilling. Heavier, weighted utensils can be helpful for some people. Special weights that attach to the wrist may help some people with tremor.

## **Medicines**

If your tremor is affecting your life, medication such as Propranolol (a beta-blocker) may be tried. This medication can help to lessen the tremor in up to half of people. However, beta-blockers are not suitable for all and are avoided in those with asthma and COPD or those with heart block or a slow pulse. Beta-blockers are used with caution in people with diabetes who are on insulin. All medications have potential side effects and beta-blockers can lower blood pressure, slow the heartbeat, disturb sleep patterns, exacerbate low mood and depression, cause impotence and reduce exercise tolerance. Your doctor will discuss with you the potential benefits and side effects of taking beta-blockers for tremor before starting.

For some patients with tremor that is significantly impacting upon their life, anti-seizure medications may be considered. These include: primidone, gabapentin, topiramate. These medications can also have side effects and for some patients the potential side effects are more troublesome than the tremor and in discussion with your doctor you may choose not to have medications for tremor.

## Other treatments

In certain circumstances injections with Botox may be considered. These injections relax the muscles but usually need to be repeated for the effects to last. This is not suitable for all patients.

In severe cases of tremor, a type of brain surgery (deep brain stimulation) may be considered for tremor. This is relatively rare.

## Ageing-related tremor

In some people, tremor begins after the age of 60 and this is sometimes referred to as **late-onset essential tremor** or **ageing-related tremor**. People who develop tremor at an older age sometimes find that it worsens a bit quicker than for others. The medications used to lessen tremor may have more side effects as you get older and your doctor will discuss the potential benefits and risk with you.

## Is essential tremor the same as Parkinson's disease?

No. essential tremor is not the same as Parkinson's disease. Parkinson's disease can also cause tremor, and essential tremor can sometimes be confused with Parkinson's. essential tremor is about 10 times more common than Parkinson's.

In essential tremor, shaking of the hands is most noticeable when the hands are moving or in certain positions. In Parkinson's disease the opposite is usually the case and tremor is worse when hands are relaxed and improves when moving or using the hands. Parkinson's disease also causes other movement issues including slowness, stiffness, balance and walking difficulties and your doctor will assess for these.

## Where to get more information

You may wish to get more information on essential tremor. You can discuss this with your doctor and run through any questions you may have.

You may also find it helpful to look at the **National Tremor Foundation website**. Search for the website below or scan the QR code using the camera app on your phone or tablet:

[tremor.org.uk](http://tremor.org.uk)

