

Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT) for Schizophrenia

What is ECT?

Electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) is a safe and effective treatment for various mental health conditions, including schizophrenia and schizoaffective disorder.

ECT has been shown to help reduce hallucinations (sensations that are not real), delusions (beliefs that cannot be real), and repetitive movements which are difficult to control.

When combined with antipsychotic medications, ECT can rapidly improve symptoms.

ECT may also be an option for treatment resistant schizophrenia, where antipsychotic medications have been ineffective at targeting symptoms.

Patients often report an improved attitude and positive experiences after ECT. We encourage you to discuss appropriate treatment options with your psychiatrist.

What is the ECT procedure like?

The procedure takes about 10 minutes. You will be monitored by your treatment team afterwards.

You will be given a general anesthetic and a muscle relaxant. This will help you sleep and ensure that you do not feel any pain during the procedure.

Electrodes will be placed on your scalp. An electrical stimulus will be passed through the electrodes to induce a brief seizure, which usually lasts between 20 and 90 seconds.

How often is treatment?

Although ECT is effective, it is not a cure, and you may need ongoing treatment.

When you are first treated with ECT, your sessions will include 2-3 treatments/week, over 2-4 weeks. Between 12 and 40 treatments are needed for remission of symptoms.

After remission of symptoms, you may receive maintenance ECT to prevent relapse. This is usually administered once a week, for up to a year.



“I want you to know that I am feeling much better. I am still on my medication but life [is] worth living again.”

Anonymous patient who received ECT



ECT myths

ECT is one of the most misunderstood treatments for schizophrenia. Below, we address some of the false beliefs about ECT.

MYTH: ECT is painful

FACT: You will be given a muscle relaxant and a general anesthetic, so you can sleep during the procedure, and you feel no pain. You will be continually monitored by your treatment team.

MYTH: I will experience brain damage

FACT: There is no evidence to suggest that treatment with ECT can cause brain damage. Some patients experience memory loss of recent events, but usually recover several months after treatment has ended.

What are some common side effects of ECT?

The most common side effects include short-term memory loss, confusion, headaches, and muscle aches. Patients usually recover from confusion, and head- and muscle aches shortly after treatment. Short term memory loss may persist for some individuals.

ECT procedures, such as electrode placement and stimulus dose, can be adjusted to minimize the risk of cognitive side effects.

What were the treatment outcomes for patients with schizophrenia who received ECT at CAMH?

A 2017 study at CAMH reviewed the outcomes for 144 patients with schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder who were treated with ECT. They found that 77% of patients responded well to treatment. Examples of treatment response included: reduction in need for medications, rapid discharge after treatment, and reduction in symptoms, such as hallucinations or delusions. In contrast, 9% of patients experienced cognitive impairment, such as temporary disorientation or memory loss.

To learn more about participating in psychosis research at CAMH, contact us at 416 535-8501, ext. 31765 or schizophrenia.research@camh.ca.

For information about programs and services at CAMH, please visit www.camh.ca or call 416 535-8501 (or 1 800 463-6273).