

Obsessive Compulsive Contamination Fears

What are OC contamination fears?

- The fear of becoming personally contaminated through one's own actions, being contaminated by others, contaminating others, or different combinations of any of these.
- The fear of coming into contact with either real or magical things viewed as harmful.
 - The real things may include viruses, bacteria, bodily waste or secretions, people who appear ill or unclean, poisons, radiation, or toxic chemicals.
 - The magical things may include bad luck, the names of illnesses, or other people who may seem to have some bad or dislikable traits.

What are some typical symptoms of O-C contamination fears?

- Getting an illness, either serious or fatal, or spreading an illness to others through contact with viruses, bacteria, animals, or people who appear to be ill or simply unclean.
- Becoming ill through contact with such things as blood, urine, feces, semen, sweat, saliva, etc.
- Being poisoned by dangerous or common household chemicals, or poisoning others accidentally.
- Becoming ill in a magical way through contact with the names of illnesses, disabled people, or pictures or names of people known to have had serious or fatal illnesses.
- Having bad luck attaching itself to oneself in a magical way through contact with bad numbers, or objects associated with bad events (clothing worn to a funeral, for example.)

These obsessive fears are usually dealt with through compulsions. These compulsions might include:

- Repetitive hand washing, showering, or disinfecting of one's body or possessions
- Throwing away or avoiding things thought to be contaminated and that can't be cleaned
- Repeated questioning of others as to whether they, or certain things may be contaminated
- Avoiding certain people, objects, or places seen as being contaminated
- Constant researching to find out whether certain things may be contaminated or dangerous
- Magical rituals (prayers, undoing rituals, etc.) to neutralize magical contamination
- Maintaining clean areas within homes or workplaces that others cannot enter or touch
- Repeatedly asking others for reassurance that they, or certain things are safe or not

What effects do these fears have on sufferer's lives?

- Their social contact with other people may become limited, and close relationships may suffer
- Their ability to function at work may suffer
- Their freedom to go out and function normally in public places may be seriously hampered
- They may protect their living spaces to the point where others may not be allowed to visit them
- They may suffer physical effects, such as cracking skin or other types of skin damage

Can OC contamination fears be treated, and if so, how is this done?

The answer is a definite 'yes.' It responds quite well to the type of cognitive behavioral treatment known as Exposure and Response Prevention (ERP), shown to effectively relieve the symptoms of OCD. In ERP, patients begin with assignments that are easier for them, and gradually work their way up to those that are more difficult. If a feared substance or situation is too difficult to confront in a

whole step, it is approached gradually. Patients are then instructed to not wash, wipe, or disinfect themselves or their things, in some cases for increasingly longer periods of time. Family and friends are taught to not take part in rituals and to not give reassurance or answers to repetitive questions. Typical strategies would include:

- Touching, either directly or indirectly, various feared objects and substances both in their home environment and in public places, and then resisting washing, wiping, or disinfecting themselves, their environment, or their things
- Visiting places thought to be contaminated
- Getting close to and possibly touching other people believed to be contaminated
- Using feared possessions
- Teaching patients how to challenge their beliefs about just how hazardous everyday objects, places, or situations actually are
- Allowing their clean areas to gradually become more and more contaminated
- Coming into contact with feared numbers, words, and names

How can I help a friend or family member with contamination fears?

- Encourage them to get themselves into treatment as soon as possible
- If they are uncertain, you can help them to obtain information about treatment from expert sources. This might include downloading information from a reputable website (such as the International OCD Foundation's) or helping them to find one of the more highly recommended books on the subject
- Once you have tried these steps, respect their right to continue to move forward at their own pace
- Resist becoming involved in helping them to wash or clean themselves or their things, reassuring them that they are not in danger, or functioning for them where they will not or cannot

Can't people simply avoid the things they fear?

The answer is a definite 'no.' OCD has a way of spreading out into many areas of a sufferer's life, and avoidance only leads to more avoidance. People with OCD tend to not stay with the things they fear long enough to learn the truth about them, or to develop a tolerance to them. The best way to overcome fears is by doing feared things and then learning the truth of what really happens.

How can I have a conversation with a friend or family member who is ready to talk about their O-C contamination fears?

This is something that has to be done carefully and with sensitivity. If you are going to bring up the subject, it helps to first inform yourself about the disorder. People with OCD already experience feelings of shame about their symptoms, and often fear being thought of as *crazy* or *insane* by others. Try to listen without judging, and try to understand how difficult it can be for them. Encourage them to seek help from someone specialized in treating OCD, but respect their right to not seek help at that point should they choose.

Can medicine be of help to reduce contamination fears?

Medicine can be of great help as part of a larger OCD treatment plan. Research has shown that medicine together with therapy can produce better results than either one alone. Medicine can reduce the occurrence and believability of obsessive thoughts, making it easier for the sufferer to take part in therapy. Therapy can then reduce anxiety and stop compulsions. Those with milder OCD may be more likely to succeed without it, while those with moderate to severe symptoms may find it much more necessary.

Author: Fred Penzel, Ph.D., Western Suffolk Psychological Services, Huntington, NY

Copyright © 2010 International OCD Foundation (IOCDF), PO Box 961029, Boston, MA 02196, 617.973.5801

<http://www.ocfoundation.org>