

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder in Children and Teenagers

What is obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)?

OCD is an anxiety disorder that consists of obsessions and compulsions. *Obsessions* are unwanted ideas, thoughts, images or urges that are unpleasant and may cause worry, guilt or shame. *Compulsions*, also called rituals, are behaviors the child feels he or she must perform repeatedly to reduce the upsetting feelings or prevent something bad from happening. To be diagnosed as OCD, these behaviors must be time-consuming and interfere with the child's daily life.

What kinds of obsessions do children and teenagers have?

Children may have worries about germs, getting sick, dying, bad things happening, or doing something wrong. Feelings that things have to be "just right" are common in children. Some children have very disturbing thoughts or images of hurting others, or improper thoughts or images of sex.

What compulsions or rituals do children and teenagers have?

There are many different rituals such as washing and cleaning, repeating actions until they are just right, starting things over again, doing things evenly, erasing, rewriting, asking the same question over and over again, confessing or apologizing, saying lucky words or numbers, checking, touching, tapping, counting, praying, ordering, arranging and hoarding.

How is OCD different from other childhood routines?

It is normal for many young children to have routines at mealtime, bedtime or when saying goodbye. These common routines lessen as children get older. For children with OCD, the routines continue past the appropriate age, or become too frequent, intense or upsetting, and begin to interfere with the child's daily life.

How common is OCD among children and teenagers?

About half a million children in the United States suffer from OCD. This means that about one in 200 children, or four to five children in an average-sized elementary school, and about 20 teenagers in a large high school may have OCD.

Is OCD in children and teenagers different from OCD in adults?

Children experience some of the same obsessions and compulsions as adults. One third of adults with OCD developed their symptoms when they were children. Unlike adults, children may not always recognize that their symptoms are senseless or that their compulsions are excessive. They also involve their family members in their rituals. For instance, they may insist that everyone in the family wash their hands a certain way, or that their parents check their homework repeatedly.

How does OCD affect children and teenagers?

OCD can make daily life very stressful for children. Rituals usually take a lot of time, and children often are late for school or activities. This often results in tension or arguments in the family. Children are unable to enjoy time with friends or have fun when OCD takes up all their spare time. At school, obsessions and rituals such as checking, erasing and re-doing assignments affect attention and focus, completion of tasks and school attendance. Older children and teenagers may worry that they are crazy and work hard to hide their OCD from others. Getting through a day with OCD can be exhausting. Children with OCD often have lengthy bedtime rituals that they feel must be completed. They therefore go to bed late and are tired during the day. All this stress may make them sad, angry or explosive.

How does OCD affect families?

Home life often suffers when a child has OCD. At first, parents may be confused or frustrated by their child's odd behaviors. They may become scared when their child gets very upset and cannot seem to stop the rituals. Children with OCD may make their families take part in their OCD in many different ways: They often look for reassurance by repeatedly ask their parents the same questions, and demanding answers each time. They may want help from parents and siblings in completing their rituals. They may insist that parents and siblings follow their OCD rituals as well. They may get very angry if they do not "get their way." All of this is very stressful for the family, who may feel that they cannot relax and that home life is very tense. Parents may feel that they must change the family's daily routine or give in to the child's demands to prevent the child from becoming too anxious or angry. Parents may go through many different feelings including fear, frustration, anger, guilt and sadness. They often worry about whether their child will get well again, and what their future might be like.

Can OCD in children and teenagers be treated?

Yes, OCD in children can be effectively treated. Although there is no cure for OCD, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and medicines are effective in managing the symptoms. Experts agree that CBT is the treatment of choice for children with OCD. Whenever possible, CBT should be tried before medicine with children.

What is CBT and how does it work?

Using a CBT strategy called exposure and response prevention (ERP), children with OCD can learn that they are in charge, not OCD. They can learn to do the *opposite* of what the OCD tells them to do, by facing their fears slowly in small steps (exposure), without giving in to the rituals (response prevention). ERP helps them find out that their fears don't come true, and that they can *habituate* or get used to the scary feeling, just like they might get used to cold water in the swimming pool.

What medications help children with OCD?

The medicines used to treat OCD in children are antidepressants called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI's). Medicines should only be considered when the OCD symptoms are moderate to severe. There is no one "best" medicine for any child because the medicines affect each person differently. Your child's doctor will decide which medicine to try. The medicines take some time to act, so it is important to wait for 10-12 weeks for the full effect. Although medicines may decrease OCD, the symptoms often return when the child stops taking medication.

I think my child may have OCD. What should I do?

You have already taken an important step by educating yourself and reading this sheet. If the OCD symptoms upset your child and interfere with his or her everyday life (school, friends, behavior, etc.), talk to your child's pediatrician or seek an evaluation with a qualified mental health professional such as a psychologist, psychiatrist or social worker. You are your child's best advocate. It is important to find a CBT therapist or clinic with a good reputation for treating children with OCD, and who will involve you in your child's treatment as well. If you are looking for medication treatment, it is also important to find a doctor who is experienced in treating children with OCD. You can find listings of professionals at www.ocfoundation.org, www.abct.org and www.adaa.org. However, always ask questions to make sure that the therapist or doctor you are considering is experienced in treating children with OCD.

Author: Aureen Pinto Wagner, Ph.D., Clinical Associate Professor of Neurology, University of Rochester School of Medicine & Dentistry; Member, Scientific Advisory Board of the International OCD Foundation