



## Treating Depression With Electroconvulsive Therapy

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# Treating Depression With Electroconvulsive Therapy

**D**epression is an illness associated with persistent feelings of sadness or loss of interest in life, often accompanied by changes in sleep and appetite. Without treatment, the effects of depression can be incapacitating and last for a long time. Therefore, it is important to talk to your doctor if you think you are depressed. He or she can help you with a plan for treating the illness.

Depression may be treated with **psychotherapy** (sometimes called “counseling” or “talk therapy”) or with **antidepressant medications**, or, as is often the case, with a combination of psychotherapy and medication. There are times when **electroconvulsive therapy (ECT)** may also be part of the treatment plan.

An article in the March 14, 2001, issue of *JAMA* reports on a study of the effectiveness of receiving medication to control depression after receiving ECT.

## WHAT IS ELECTROCONVULSIVE THERAPY (ECT)?

ECT is a procedure during which the brain is briefly stimulated with electricity, resulting in a brief seizure. Although the changes in the brain that are caused by the electrical stimulation are not fully understood, it is believed that the treatment causes changes in the chemistry of the brain that are beneficial to the patient. ECT is used because its success rate in treating depression is high.

## HOW IS ECT GIVEN?

ECT is given in a series of treatments. The patient receiving the treatment is given **general anesthesia** (use of drugs to bring about a loss of sensation and consciousness) and medication that relaxes the muscles so that there will be no movement of the body during the procedure.

## ARE THERE SIDE EFFECTS ASSOCIATED WITH ECT?

Side effects associated with ECT may be caused by the anesthesia or the ECT itself, or by both. Immediate side effects that may occur within the first few hours after a treatment include:

- Headaches
- Muscle aches or muscle soreness
- Nausea
- Confusion

Loss of memory for some events that occurred around the time of the treatments is common. This memory loss improves, but some patients have persisting gaps in memory for that time period.

Sources: National Institute of Mental Health, American Psychiatric Association, The American Academy of Family Physicians, National Mental Health Association, The AMA Home Medical Library, The AMA Complete Guide to Women's Health, The AMA Encyclopedia of Medicine

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## WHEN IS ECT USED?

ECT is generally used in severely depressed patients when other therapies:

- Are not working effectively
- Cause adverse effects
- May not work quickly enough

ECT can also be used for the treatment of other mental disorders, such as **mania** (abnormal or excessive feelings of elation, agitation, or irritability) and some forms of **schizophrenia** (a severe mental illness characterized by losing touch with reality that includes abnormal thought patterns, emotional reactions, and behavior).

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- National Institute of Mental Health  
800/421-4211  
[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)
- American Psychiatric Association  
APA Answer Center  
Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT)  
1400 K St NW  
Washington, DC 20005  
Fax on demand 202/682-6000  
[www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org)

## INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page Index on *JAMA*'s Web site at [www.jama.com](http://www.jama.com). Previous JAMA Patient Pages on depression were published September 27, 2000, and June 3, 1998.

