

Monthly Spotlight

January 2012

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Obsessive-compulsive disorder is an anxiety disorder in which people have unwanted and repeated thoughts, feelings, ideas, sensations (obsessions), or behaviors that make them feel driven to do something (compulsions). Often the person carries out the behaviors to get rid of the obsessive thoughts, but this only provides temporary relief. Not performing the obsessive rituals can cause great anxiety. Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is more common than was once thought. Most people who develop it show symptoms by age 30.

There are several theories about the cause of OCD, but none have been confirmed. Some reports have linked OCD to head injury and infections. Several studies have shown that there are brain abnormalities in patients with OCD, but more research is needed.

About 20% of people with OCD have tics, which suggests the condition may be related to Tourette syndrome. However, this link is not clear.

Symptoms can include:

- Obsessions or compulsions that are not due to medical illness or drug use
- Obsessions or compulsions that cause major distress or interfere with everyday life

There are many types of obsessions and compulsions. One example is an excessive fear of germs and the compulsion to repeatedly wash the hands to ward off infection. The person usually recognizes that the behavior is excessive or unreasonable. OCD is a long-term (chronic) illness with periods of severe symptoms followed by times of improvement following medication or behavioral therapy. However, a completely symptom-free period is unusual. Most people improve with treatment.

Long-term complications of OCD have to do with the type of obsessions or compulsions. For example, constant hand washing can cause skin breakdown. However, OCD does not usually progress into another disease. Seek treatment if your symptoms interfere with daily life, work, or relationships.

There is no known prevention for this disorder.