**Munchausen Syndrome**

Munchausen syndrome is a disorder where someone pretends to be ill or induces symptoms of illness in themselves.

## **More in**[**Munchausen syndrome**](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/munchausen-syndrome/)

# Overview - Munchausen syndrome

**Munchausen syndrome is a psychological condition where someone pretends to be ill or deliberately produces symptoms of illness in themselves.**

Their main intention is to assume the "sick role" so that people care for them and they are the centre of attention.

Any practical benefit in pretending to be sick – for example, claiming incapacity benefit – is not the reason for their behaviour.

Munchausen syndrome is named after a German aristocrat, Baron Munchausen, who became famous for telling wild, unbelievable tales about his exploits.

## **Types of behaviour**

People with Munchausen syndrome can behave in a number of different ways, including:

* pretending to have psychological symptoms – for example, claiming to hear voices or claiming to see things that are not really there
* pretending to have physical symptoms – for example, claiming to have chest pain or a stomach ache
* actively trying to get ill – such as deliberately infecting a wound by rubbing dirt into it

Some people with Munchausen syndrome may spend years travelling from hospital to hospital faking a wide range of illnesses. When it's discovered they're lying, they may suddenly leave hospital and move to another area.

People with Munchausen syndrome can be very manipulative and, in the most serious cases, may undergo painful and sometimes life-threatening surgery, even though they know it's unnecessary.

[Read more about the signs and symptoms of Munchausen syndrome](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/munchausen-syndrome/symptoms/)

## **What causes Munchausen syndrome?**

Munchausen syndrome is complex and poorly understood. Many people refuse psychiatric treatment or psychological profiling, and it's unclear why people with the syndrome behave the way they do.

Several factors have been identified as possible causes of Munchausen syndrome.

These include:

* emotional trauma or illness during childhood – this often resulted in extensive medical attention
* a [personality disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/personality-disorder/) – a mental health condition that causes patterns of abnormal thinking and behaviour
* a grudge against authority figures or healthcare professionals

### **Childhood trauma**

Munchausen syndrome may be caused by parental neglect and abandonment, or other childhood trauma.

As a result of this trauma, a person may have unresolved issues with their parents that cause them to fake illness. They may do this because they:

* have a compulsion to punish themselves by making themselves ill because they feel unworthy
* need to feel important and be the centre of attention
* need to pass responsibility for their wellbeing and care on to other people

There's also some evidence to suggest people who have had extensive medical procedures or received prolonged medical attention during childhood or their teenage years, are more likely to develop Munchausen syndrome when they're older.

This may be because they associate their childhood memories with a sense of being cared for. As they get older, they try to obtain the same feelings of reassurance by pretending to be ill.

### **Personality disorders**

Different personality disorders thought to be linked with Munchausen syndrome include:

* antisocial personality disorder – where a person may take pleasure in manipulating and deceiving doctors, giving them a sense of power and control
* borderline personality disorder – where a person struggles to control their feelings and often swings between positive and negative views of others
* narcissistic personality disorder – where a person often swings between seeing themselves as special and fearing they're worthless

It could be that the person has an unstable sense of their own identity and also has difficulty forming meaningful relationships with others.

Playing the "sick role" allows them to adopt an identity that brings support and acceptance from others with it. Admission to hospital also gives the person a clearly defined place in a social network.

## **Diagnosing Munchausen syndrome**

Diagnosing Munchausen syndrome can be challenging for medical professionals.

People with the syndrome are often very convincing and skilled at manipulating and exploiting doctors.

### **Investigating claims**

If a healthcare professional suspects a person may have Munchausen syndrome, they'll look at the person's health records to check for inconsistencies between their claimed and actual medical history.

Healthcare professionals can also run tests to check for evidence of self-inflicted illness or tampering with clinical tests. For example, the person's blood can be checked for traces of medicine they should not be taking but which could explain their symptoms.

Doctors will also want to rule out other possible motivations for their behaviour, such as faking illness for financial gain or because they want access to strong painkillers.

Munchausen syndrome can usually be diagnosed if:

* there's clear evidence of fabricating or inducing symptoms
* the person's prime motivation is to be seen as sick
* there's no other likely reason or explanation for their behaviour

## **Treating Munchausen syndrome**

Treating Munchausen syndrome can be difficult because most people with it refuse to admit they have a problem and refuse to co-operate with treatment plans.

Some experts recommend that healthcare professionals should adopt a gentle non-confrontational approach, suggesting the person may benefit from a referral to a psychiatrist.

Others argue that a person with Munchausen syndrome should be confronted directly and asked why they've lied and whether they have stress and anxiety.

People who have Munchausen syndrome have a genuine mental health condition but will often only admit to having a physical illness.

If a person admits to their behaviour, they can be referred to a psychiatrist for further treatment. If they do not admit to lying, most experts agree the doctor in charge of their care should minimise medical contact with them.

This is because the doctor-patient relationship is based on trust and if there's evidence the patient can no longer be trusted, the doctor is unable to continue treating them.

### **Psychiatric treatment and CBT**

It may be possible to help control the [symptoms of Munchausen syndrome](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/munchausen-syndrome/symptoms/) if the person admits they have a problem and co-operates with treatment.

There's no standard treatment for Munchausen syndrome, but a combination of psychoanalysis and [cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/cognitive-behavioural-therapy-cbt/overview/) has shown some success controlling symptoms.

Psychoanalysis is a type of [psychotherapy](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/types-of-talking-therapies/) that attempts to uncover and resolve unconscious beliefs and motivations.

CBT helps a person identify unhelpful and unrealistic beliefs and behavioural patterns. A specially trained therapist teaches the person ways of replacing unrealistic beliefs with more realistic and balanced ones.

### **Family therapy**

People with Munchausen syndrome still in close contact with their family may also benefit from having family therapy.

The person with the syndrome and their close family members discuss how it's affected the family and the positive changes that can be made.

It can also teach family members how to avoid reinforcing the person's abnormal behaviour. For example, this could involve recognising when the person is playing the "sick role" and avoiding showing them concern or offering support.

## **Who's affected by Munchausen syndrome?**

There appear to be 2 separate groups of people affected by Munchausen syndrome. They are:

* women who are 20 to 40 years of age, often with a background in healthcare
* unmarried white men who are 30 to 50 years of age

It's unclear why these 2 groups tend to be affected by Munchausen syndrome.

Some experts believe Munchausen syndrome is underdiagnosed because many people succeed in deceiving medical staff. It's also possible cases may be overdiagnosed as the same person could use different identities.

## **Fabricated or induced illness**

[Fabricated or induced illness](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/fabricated-or-induced-illness/overview/), which used to be known as Munchausen syndrome by proxy, is a related condition.

This is where a person fakes or induces illness in a person under their care, such as their child.

[**Overview – Munchausen syndrome**](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/munchausen-syndrome/overview/)

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/munchausen-syndrome/>

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# Signs and symptoms – Munchausen syndrome

**Signs and symptoms of Munchausen syndrome may include pretending to be ill, or self-harming to aggravate or induce illness.**

There are 4 main ways people with Munchausen syndrome fake or induce illnesses:

* lying about symptoms – for example, choosing symptoms that are difficult to disprove, such as having a severe headache or pretending to have a seizure or to pass out
* tampering with test results – for example, heating a thermometer to suggest a fever or adding blood to a urine sample
* self-infliction – for example, cutting or burning themselves, poisoning themselves with drugs, or eating food contaminated with bacteria
* aggravating conditions – for example, rubbing poo into wounds to cause an infection, or re-opening previously healed wounds

## **Clues to Munchausen syndrome**

Some clues that a person may have Munchausen syndrome include:

* making frequent visits to hospitals in different areas
* claiming to have a history of complex and serious medical conditions with no or little supporting evidence – people often claim they've spent a long time out of the country
* having symptoms that do not match test results
* having symptoms that get worse for no apparent reason
* having very good medical knowledge
* receiving few or no hospital visitors – many people with Munchausen syndrome have a solitary lifestyle and have little contact with friends or family
* being willing to undergo often painful or dangerous tests and procedures
* reporting symptoms that are vague and inconsistent, or reporting a pattern of symptoms that are "textbook examples" of certain health conditions
* telling unbelievable and often very elaborate stories about their past – such as claiming to be a decorated war hero or that their parents are fantastically rich and powerful

## **Munchausen by internet**

Munchausen by internet is relatively new. It's where a person joins an internet support group for people with a serious health condition, such as [cystic fibrosis](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/cystic-fibrosis/) or leukaemia, and then claims to have the illness themselves.

While these actions may only be confined to the internet, they can have a significant negative impact on support groups and online communities. For example, people with genuine health conditions have reported feeling angry and betrayed when they discover they've been lied to.

Signs that suggest someone's online posts may not be genuine include:

* posts and messages that contain large chunks of information and appear to have been directly copied from health websites, such as NHS.UK
* reports of having symptoms that appear to be much more severe than most people would experience
* making claims of near-fatal bouts of illness followed by a miraculous recovery
* making fantastic claims that they later contradict or are shown to be false – for example, they may claim to be attending a certain hospital that does not actually exist
* claiming to have continual dramatic events in their life, such as loved ones dying or being the victim of a violent crime, particularly when other group members have become a focus of attention
* pretending to be unconcerned when they talk about serious problems, probably to attract attention and sympathy
* other "people" claiming to post on their behalf, such as a parent or partner, but they use exactly the same style of writing

[**Signs and symptoms - Munchausen syndrome**](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/munchausen-syndrome/symptoms/)

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[Munchausen syndrome - NHS](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/munchausen-syndrome/)

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