



Patient education: Post-traumatic stress disorder (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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What is post-traumatic stress disorder?

Post-traumatic stress disorder, or "PTSD," is a condition that can happen after people see or live through a trauma. A trauma is an intense event that involves serious injury or death, or the chance of serious injury or death. This can include medical events, such as a heart attack, surgery, or being in the intensive care unit ("ICU"). PTSD can cause nightmares, upsetting memories, anxiety, and other symptoms.

Not everyone who sees or lives through a trauma will get PTSD. Doctors do not know why some people get PTSD and others don't.

PTSD can happen at any age.

What are the symptoms of PTSD?

The symptoms of PTSD include:

- Reliving the trauma through thoughts and feelings – People can have upsetting memories, nightmares, or flashbacks. Flashbacks are when people "see" or feel the trauma over and over again.
- Feeling "numb" and avoiding certain people or places – People avoid thinking about the trauma. They might also avoid people and places that remind them of it. Some people also feel "numb." They might not enjoy activities they used to enjoy, or feel like part of the world around them.

- Having intense feelings – These can include anger, fear, or worry. People might frighten or startle easily. Many people have trouble sleeping.

These symptoms can start right after the trauma. If they last longer than 3 days, they could be symptoms of a related condition called "acute stress disorder" (ASD). If they last longer than a month, they could be symptoms of PTSD. But sometimes, symptoms of PTSD start years later. They often affect a person's job, relationships, or daily life.

Symptoms of PTSD can come and go. They might return when people are under stress or see or hear something that reminds them of the trauma.

How can my doctor or nurse tell if I have PTSD?

They should be able to tell if you have it by learning about your symptoms, asking questions, and doing an exam.

How is PTSD treated?

PTSD is treated with 1 or both of the following:

- Trauma-focused therapy – This involves using specific techniques to talk or think about the trauma and how it has affected you. Examples include cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), exposure therapy, and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). Your therapist will work with you to decide which type of trauma-focused therapy is most appropriate for you.
- Medicines – Doctors can use different types of medicines to treat PTSD. The right one for you will depend on your symptoms and the medicine's side effects. People usually start feeling better after they have been on medicine for a few weeks.

When should I get help?

If you are having trouble coping because of your PTSD symptoms, you should do 1 or both of the following:

- See a doctor to start treatment with medicine
- See a therapist who is trained in trauma-focused therapy

If you are thinking of hurting yourself, or if you feel that life isn't worth living, get help **right away**:

- If you see a therapist or doctor for your PTSD, call them right away
- If you do not see a therapist or doctor, or if you can't reach them right away, **call for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, call 9-1-1)** or go to the emergency department

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