



Pharmaceutical
Society of Australia



Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a prolonged and sometimes delayed anxiety disorder resulting from a traumatic event. A large number of cases are war-related. People suffering from PTSD can benefit from counselling, support and medicines.

Who gets PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a serious psychological reaction that some people develop after an overwhelmingly frightening or traumatic experience, especially an experience that threatens life or safety (e.g., war, assault, natural disaster, serious accident, torture or abuse).

Most people who experience a traumatic event will have emotional and psychological reactions (e.g., fear, sadness, guilt, shame, anger) that lessen with time. Some people develop the longer lasting condition of PTSD.

Signs and symptoms

PTSD symptoms may occur immediately after the traumatic event or may appear months or years later. There are three main types of symptoms:

- Reliving the traumatic event through unwanted and recurring memories (flashbacks) or nightmares. Intense emotional or physical reactions such as sweating, heart palpitations or panic may accompany these recurring memories
- Being excessively wound up or alert. This may lead to sleeping difficulties, irritability, poor concentration, being easily startled and constantly watching for signs of danger
- Avoiding reminders of the event and feeling emotionally numb. People with PTSD intentionally avoid things associated with the traumatic event such as thoughts, feelings, people, places and activities. They may also lose interest in daily life, feel detached from family and friends and feel flat or numb.

PTSD or a traumatic event may also lead to anxiety, depression and misuse of alcohol or other drugs.

Treatment

Treatment can help people with PTSD get relief from symptoms, improve their family life and social relationships and obtain stable employment.

Management of PTSD often involves a number of different strategies including:

- Education about the condition
- Counselling and psychological therapies, which may involve learning to recall what happened without distress
- Support groups with others suffering from PTSD
- Treatment programs (e.g., anger management)
- Medicines
- Reducing reliance on alcohol or inappropriate medicines, if this is a problem
- Support for family members.

Medicines

Prescription medicines that can help a person with PTSD include:

- Anti-anxiety medicines – may help relieve stress and anxiety symptoms
- Antidepressants – may help relieve anxiety, depression and other PTSD symptoms.

Consult your doctor or pharmacist before:

- Stopping regular PTSD medicines – stopping suddenly may make symptoms worse
- Taking any medicines (including complementary medicines) in addition to prescribed PTSD medicines – as they may interfere with each other.

Talk to your doctor or pharmacist if you have any questions or concerns about medicines for PTSD.

What about alcohol?

Some people drink alcohol heavily when under stress.

Alcohol will not help PTSD and may make it worse. It is important to know that alcohol:

- Will impair driving and the ability to work
- May make you feel depressed
- May increase side effects of PTSD medicines. It will increase sedation from anti-anxiety medicines.

If taking medicines, always check with a doctor or pharmacist before drinking alcohol.

Self care

- Acknowledge PTSD symptoms and seek help.
- Remember that asking for help is not a sign of weakness.
- Accept support from family and friends – studies show this helps recovery.
- Do things that help you relax. Learn and use some relaxation techniques.
- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week. Regular aerobic exercise can help reduce the physical effects of stress and trauma.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and grain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Get adequate sleep and rest.
- Limit or stop smoking as nicotine may make anxiety worse. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.
- Limit or stop caffeine (e.g., tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks) as it may make anxiety worse.
- Follow 'low-risk' drinking guidelines for alcohol or stop drinking alcohol. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

Important

If you (or someone you know) have been exposed to a traumatic event (even if it was many years ago), check the list of symptoms – you (or your friend) may benefit from consulting a doctor about PTSD.

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

- Some people find it helpful to write about their experiences and feelings.
- Be aware of anniversaries or events that may increase distress.
- Join a support group.

If you are an emergency services worker, post-incident counselling is available for YOU as well as for the trauma victims.

Care for family members

PTSD also impacts on family members of people with PTSD. They may need to cope with difficult behaviour and job instability. Families can get assistance from support organisations.

Related fact cards

- *Alcohol*
- *Anxiety*
- *Depression*
- *Medicines and Driving (website only – ask your pharmacist)*
- *Relaxation Techniques*
- *Sleeping Problems*
- *Staying a Non-smoker*
- *Wise Use of Medicines (website only – ask your pharmacist)*

For more information

A doctor – listed under 'Medical Practitioners' in the yellow pages of the phone book.

Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health (ACPMH) – phone (03) 9936 5100 or website www.ncptsd.unimelb.edu.au

HEALTH/Insite – website www.healthinsite.gov.au

Lifeline – phone 13 11 14 (freecall 24 hours service from anywhere in Australia) or website www.lifeline.org.au

The Right Mix – information from the Department of Veterans' Affairs on the use and misuse of alcohol. Website www.therightmix.gov.au

Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS) – phone 1800 011 046 (freecall from anywhere in Australia) or website www.dva.gov.au/health/vvcs/vvcs.htm

Victims of Crime – contact your local police station.

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability.

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST.

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 131 126 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

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