

Managing tics at school

Information for patients

This resource answers some of the questions you may have about tics. It explains what a tic is and describes how it might impact a student at school. It also details some different strategies that you can use to support a student with tics in the classroom.

What is a tic?

A tic refers to a sudden, repetitive movement or vocalisation that is involuntary and often difficult to control.

Types of tics

Tics can be classified into two main types.

- Motor tics: These involve physical movements, such as blinking, head jerking, shoulder shrugging, facial grimacing, or other sudden limb movements.
- Vocal tics: These involve involuntary sounds or vocalisations, such as throat clearing, grunting, humming, or making other noises.

Tics can also be either simple or complex.

- Simple tics involve just a few parts of the body.
- Complex tics usually involve several different parts of the body and can have a pattern.

Facts about tics

- About 1% of children of school age experience motor and/or vocal tics.
- Tics often start with an uncomfortable sensation or 'urge' that builds up in the body. This urge is then relieved after doing the tic. However, this relief only lasts for a short period before the urge returns.
- Tics may change, and the intensity can vary inconsistently from day to day.
- While tics may appear purposeful, they are neurological in nature and involuntary.
- 30 to 50% of young people experiencing tics find that they reduce by early adulthood.

Things that can make tics worse

- Stress
- Anxiety
- Tiredness

- Worry
- Hunger
- Excitement
- Change
- Focusing on or discussing the tics

Things that help to reduce tics

- Exercise
- Distraction
- Deep concentration
- Mindfulness
- Sleep
- Routine

Is there a difference between tics and Tourette's?

All individuals with Tourette's syndrome have tics, but not everyone with tics has Tourette's syndrome. There are three different groups that a person experiencing tics might fall in to.

1. Probable tic disorder: This is when someone has motor and/or vocal tics for less than 12 months.
2. Chronic tic disorder: This is when someone has motor and/or vocal tics for more than 12 months.
3. Tourette's syndrome: This is when someone has at least two motor tics and at least one vocal tic for more than 12 months.

How do tics impact a student at school?

Tics can have a range of impacts on a student at school, affecting both their academic performance and their social interactions.

Academic concentration: Tics can be distracting for a student, making it difficult to focus in class and during tests.

Peer relations: Peers might not understand a student's tics which could lead to stigma, teasing or bullying.

Fatigue: The effort required to cope with and suppress tics can be mentally and physically tiring for a student, impacting their energy levels and ability to engage in learning.

Task completion: Frequent tics might impact a student's ability to keep up with classroom activities.

Anxiety: The anticipation of when tics might happen and how others might react can cause anxiety and stress for a student.

What can be done at school to support a student with tics?

There is no one-size-fits-all 'cure' for tics, but there are some different strategies that might help a student to cope with tics in the classroom.

Normalise and educate: Reduce stigma by educating the class about tics. Tics tend to be less disruptive when everyone knows why they occur and what they might be like.

Ignore: Ignore tics when possible and avoid punishing a student for their tics.

Extra time and breaks: Implement reasonable adjustments as needed, such as allowing a student to take short breaks or providing extra time for tasks disrupted by tics.

Seating: Some students might benefit from sitting in a position that has more personal space to accommodate for motor tics, or sitting close to the door if they need to exit frequently. Some students might benefit from having a separate location during examinations and tests so that they do not have to use energy trying to suppress their symptoms.

Handwriting: Tics might impact a student's handwriting. If so, allow alternative methods such as computers or a scribe.

Stress and restlessness: Providing opportunities for the whole class to physically move, practicing relaxation or mindfulness and allowing the use of sensory toys or stress balls can help a student with tics to manage stress and restlessness. This might help to reduce their tics.

Every student is unique, so it is useful to talk to the student and their family about their personal triggers and what strategies they have found useful for coping with tics at home.

Details of additional sources of information

Further information about tics can be found on the following websites:

NHS website www.nhs.uk/conditions/tics/

Tourette's action www.tourettes-action.org.uk/

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. They can also pass on praise or thanks to our teams.

PALS at King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill, London SE5 9RS

Tel: 020 3299 3601

Email: kch-tr.palsdh@nhs.net

PALS at Princess Royal University Hospital, Farnborough Common, Orpington, Kent BR6 8ND

Tel: 01689 863252

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