ARBOUR
HOSPITAL

ELECTROCONVULSIVE THERAPY (ECT): IS ECT THE TREATMENT CHOICE FOR YOU?

ECT is most commonly used to treat patients with severe depression who fail to respond to medications or who are unable to tolerate the side effects associated with the medications. ECT may also be the treatment of choice for patients who need a more rapid response than medications can provide. The use of ECT is not limited to the treatment of depression. It may also be used to stabilize bipolar illness during extreme episodes of mania or depression. Additionally, ECT can be used to halt psychotic episodes associated with schizophrenia. Once these individuals are stabilized, medications are started or resumed.

How Does ECT Work

The exact reason for the positive actions of ECT is unknown, but this treatment appears to have many effects. There are multiple theories to explain why ECT is effective. One theory suggests that the seizure activity itself causes an alteration of the chemical messengers in the brain known as neurotransmitters. Another theory proposes that ECT treatments adjust the stress hormone regulation in the brain, which may affect energy, sleep, appetite, and mood.

The Number of Treatments needed

Treatments are normally administered three times a week on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. A course of ECT normally ranges from six to twelve treatments. The average number of treatments is nine. The number of treatments that you need will be determined by the severity of your symptoms and how rapidly you respond.

It usually takes six treatments before major improvements in your symptoms are noted. However, family members, friends, and caregivers may begin to see mild improvements following the first 3 to 6 treatments. These improvements may include an increase in your activity level, improved sleeping patterns, and a mild increase in your appetite.

Your psychiatric care providers will monitor your response to the treatments. This information combined with your input will be used to determine how many treatments you will receive.

Common Side Effects

Occasionally, a patient may have a headache, muscle aches, or nausea after the treatment. These side effects can be treated with medications before or after the ECT. If you experience any of these side effects please inform your doctor and nurse. Once the staff is aware of these side effects, measures can be taken to prevent them.

What to Expect After ECT

ECT is an extremely effective treatment, but ECT treatment is only one component of a complete treatment regimen. After your ECT course, medications will likely be required as maintenance therapy to prevent a return of your illness. ECT also can not resolve other problems associated with personal relationships or how an individual copes with the stressors of life. Other interventions such as psychotherapy may be recommended. Hopefully, because you are being relieved of the severe symptoms of your illness, you will be able to participate more effectively with other therapies that are recommended.