



Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a treatable mental health condition that affects millions of people each year.

Q: What is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

PTSD is an intense physical and emotional condition that can develop after experiencing or witnessing traumatic events. Trauma that might trigger PTSD include serious accidents, physical and sexual assault, surviving a natural disaster, the unexpected death of a loved one, or combat and wartime experiences.

Q: Who develops PTSD?

Any survivor of a traumatic event can develop PTSD. PTSD usually develops within six months of the trauma, but symptoms can also emerge many years later. Family members and caregivers of individuals with PTSD may also develop secondary traumatic stress, whose symptoms are similar to PTSD, as they cope with their loved one's struggles.

About six out of every 10 people will develop PTSD in their lifetime. Studies have shown that people experience a higher rate of PTSD following spinal cord injury.

Q: What are the symptoms of PTSD?

Symptoms of PTSD are grouped into four categories: intrusive memories, avoidance, negative changes in mood, and increased reactivity. To receive a PTSD diagnosis, symptoms must be present for more than a month and include at least one intrusive symptom, at least one avoidance symptom, at least two mood symptoms, and at least two reactivity symptoms.

Intrusive symptoms include:

- Nightmares related to the trauma that disrupt sleep
- Persistent, intrusive memories and flashbacks related to the trauma
- Frightening thoughts

Avoidance symptoms include:

- Avoiding thinking or talking about the trauma
- Avoiding the site or area where the trauma occurred and other reminders of the event

Cognition and mood-related symptoms include:

- Feelings of hopelessness
- Social isolation from family and friends
- Inability to remember key parts of the trauma
- Persistent negative emotions such as fear, anger, guilt, shame
- Feeling disengaged from daily life
- Inability to concentrate
- Persistent negative thoughts about self, others, and the world

Reactivity symptoms include:

- Irritable, easily startled
- Heightened anxiety and sense of vigilance
- Acting in a reckless or destructive manner

Individuals should also be aware of the high risk of depression and substance use disorders, which frequently develop among patients experiencing chronic PTSD.

Q: When should I seek treatment?

It's not unusual to experience a range of emotions after a traumatic event, but symptoms that last more than one month and interfere with work and home life are red flags. Talk to your doctor or healthcare provider when symptoms persist. Early intervention and treatment are critical for successfully managing and recovering from PTSD.

Q: What specialists treat PTSD?

Mental health professionals, including licensed clinical psychologists, clinical social workers, and psychiatrists, can treat PTSD.

In addition to supervised treatment, individuals may benefit from trauma survivor therapy groups and peer mentoring. Support groups may be found through

healthcare providers, hospitals, and non-profit organizations such as Trauma Survivors Network (<http://traumasurvivorsnetwork.org/pages/home>) and National Alliance on Mental Illness (<https://www.nami.org/help>).

Q: How is PTSD treated?

PTSD is commonly treated with psychotherapy (also known as “talk therapy”) and/or medication such as antidepressants.

Individual treatments may include exposure therapy, used by psychologists to help patients face and confront fears, or cognitive therapy, used to reframe the events of the trauma. Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy incorporates eye movements and rhythmic left-right stimulation as patients briefly focus on the trauma to gradually reduce the intensity of the memory.

Before beginning any treatment, patients might be introduced to relaxation strategies, breathing exercises and yoga to help control the anxiety that may accompany therapy.

Q: What is the incidence of PTSD among veterans?

Veterans experience significantly higher rates of PTSD than the general population. War zone deployment, training accidents, and sexual harassment or assault that occurs while an individual is serving in the military can cause PTSD among male and female service members.

As with other populations experiencing PTSD, symptoms may begin soon after the traumatic event, or not emerge for months or years.

Q: What resources are available for veterans?

PTSD specialists are located at all Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Centers. Treatment services offered include one-to-one mental health assessment and testing, individual and family counseling, and group therapy for veterans of specific conflicts and types of traumas. In addition, regional hubs across the country offer specialized PTSD programs at both outpatient and in-patient treatment facilities. To locate specialized programs by state, visit the VA’s searchable website for PTSD programs (<https://www.va.gov/directory/guide/PTSD.asp>).

If there are no nearby VA locations offering services, telehealth services or referrals to community clinicians will be provided.

Q: Are there clinical trials for PTSD?

Yes. To find current trials related to PTSD treatment, visit ClinicalTrials.gov (<https://www.clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/home>), a searchable website for publicly and privately supported clinical studies maintained by the National Library of Medicine at

the National Institutes of Health.

Sources: Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Merck Manual, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Institute of Mental Health.

Need to talk to someone?

Our Information Specialists are available to answer your questions.

Call toll-free 1-800-539-7309 Mon-Fri, 7 am-8 pm EST.

Or [schedule a call](#) or [ask a question online](#).

Resources for PTSD:

Military Resources:

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs: National Center for PTSD

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/>

Information Line: 802-296-6300

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs: PTSD Programs by State

<https://www.va.gov/directory/guide/PTSD.asp>

General Resources:

Caregiver Action Network: Guide for Supporting a Loved One with PTSD

https://www.caregiveraction.org/ptsd/?utm_source=annct&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=012025

Christopher & Dana Reeve Foundation/National Paralysis Resource Center: Women's Mental Health After Paralysis

<https://www.ChristopherReeve.org/booklets>

A free 44-page booklet on various topics related to women's mental health after SCI and paralysis, it includes a section on PTSD. Please call 1-800-539-7309 for a free print copy.

KidsHealth: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Children

<https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/ptsd.html?ref=search>

Written for parents of children with PTSD.

Medline Plus: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/posttraumaticstressdisorder.html>

Mental Health America: Understanding Trauma and PTSD

<https://mhanational.org/resources/understanding-trauma-and-ptsd>

National Institute of Mental Health: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder->

[ptsd/index.shtml](https://www.pva.org/ptsd/index.shtml)

Paralyzed Veterans of America has a clinical practice guideline for health care workers titled **Management of Mental Health Disorders, Substance Use Disorders, and Suicide in Adults with Spinal Cord Injury**.

www.pva.org

The information covers PTSD.

WebMD: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

<https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/post-traumatic-stress-disorder#1>

Online Support Groups and Discussion Forums:

DailyStrength: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Support Group

<http://www.dailystrength.org/c/Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder/support-group>

My PTSD: PTSD & CPTSD Global Peer Support Community

<https://www.myptsd.com/>

Patients Like Me: PTSD Community gives a snapshot of the disorder

<https://www.patientslikeme.com/conditions/24-post-traumatic-stress-disorder>

<https://www.patientslikeme.com/>

Enter PTSD in search box to find other people with PTSD.

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