Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) is an anxiety disorder that usually begins in adolescence or early adulthood, but may begin in childhood. When OCD starts in childhood, it is more common in boys than in girls. The usual time of onset is later for females than males, so the disorder is equally common among adult men and women. Without treatment, OCD usually follows a chronic course, and some persons become severely disabled by it. The October 27, 2004, issue of JAMA includes an article about treating OCD in children and adolescents.

CAUSES OF OCD

- The exact cause of OCD is not known.
- There is evidence that OCD can run in families and may have a genetic (inherited) component.
- An imbalance of serotonin, a chemical messenger in the brain, may be involved.

TREATMENTS FOR OCD

- Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are medications that have been shown to successfully reduce the symptoms of OCD and that are also used as antidepressants.
- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) for OCD involves helping patients to change their ideas or thought patterns related to obsessive thoughts and compulsions.
- Exposure and response prevention is a behavioral therapy that may be included as part of CBT. The patient is deliberately exposed to situations that tend to stimulate his or her compulsions (for example, getting his or her hands dirty). A trained therapist helps the patient to deal with the resulting anxiety while encouraging him or her not to engage in the compulsion (for example, excessive hand washing).

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Anxiety Disorders Association of America
  240/485-1001
  www.adaa.org
- American Psychiatric Association
  703/907-7300
  www.psych.org
- National Institute of Mental Health
  866/615-6464
  www.nimh.nih.gov

INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page link on JAMA’s Web site at www.jama.com. A Patient Page on obsessive-compulsive disorder was published in the November 25, 1998, issue.