

Fact Sheet: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Description and incidence: Approximately 2.2 million Americans age 18 and older, or about 1.0%, suffer from Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), characterized by uncontrollable obsessions and compulsions that the sufferer usually recognizes as excessive or unreasonable.

Obsessions are recurring thoughts or impulses that are intrusive or inappropriate and cause the sufferer anxiety. Some common obsessions are:

- ◆ Thoughts about contamination – for example, when an individual fears coming into contact with dirt, germs, or "unclean" objects.
- ◆ Persistent doubts – for example, whether or not one has turned off the iron or stove, locked the door, or turned on the answering machine.
- ◆ An extreme need for orderliness.
- ◆ Aggressive impulses or thoughts – for example, being overcome with the urge to yell "fire" in a crowded theater.

Compulsions are repetitive behaviors or rituals. Performing these rituals neutralizes the anxiety caused by obsessive thoughts, but relief is only temporary. Compulsions are incorporated into the person's daily routine and are not always directly related to the obsessive thought; for example, a person who has aggressive thoughts may count floor tiles in an effort to control the thought.

Some of the most common compulsions are:

- ◆ **Cleaning:** Sufferers concerned with germs and contaminations tend to clean constantly – for example, repeatedly washing their hands, showering, or constantly cleaning their home.
- ◆ **Checking:** Individuals may check several or even hundreds of times to make sure that stoves are turned off and doors are locked.
- ◆ **Repeating:** Some repeat a name, phrase, or action over and over.
- ◆ **Slowness:** Some individuals may take an excessively slow, methodical approach to daily activities; they may spend hours organizing and arranging objects.
- ◆ **Hoarding:** Hoarders are unable to throw away useless items, such as old newspapers, junk mail, even broken appliances; sometimes hoarding reaches the point that whole rooms are filled with saved items.

Diagnosis: To diagnose OCD, physicians must determine whether obsessions and/or compulsions consume a considerable amount of the sufferer's time – at least one hour every day – and interfere with one's ability to concentrate. Also, it is not uncommon for a sufferer to avoid certain situations; for example, someone obsessed with cleanliness may be unable to use public rest rooms.

Onset is usually gradual and most often begins in adolescence or early adulthood. Unlike adults, children with OCD do not realize that their obsessions and compulsions – which are most frequently of the washing, checking, and ordering variety – are excessive.