



# Essential Tremor Patient Handbook

**Your reference guide for the most  
common movement disorder.**

## What is essential tremor?

Essential tremor (ET) is one of the most common neurological conditions and the most common cause of tremor. Tremor is an involuntary, rhythmic shaking of any part of the body. The hands are most commonly affected in ET, but the head, voice, legs, and trunk can also be affected.

The term essential, when used in a medical context, refers to a symptom that is isolated and does not have a specific underlying cause. Thus, ET refers to a disorder that displays the primary symptom of tremor, with no known cause.

The tremor of ET is an action tremor and most commonly occurs while performing activities such as eating, drinking, writing, typing, brushing teeth, shaving, etc., (kinetic tremor) or when the hands are in an outstretched position (postural tremor). ET can therefore make it difficult to complete everyday tasks and can lead to significant disability.

Some patients may present with a combination of tremors affecting different body parts. The severity of the tremor can vary from a barely noticeable tremor only present in situations of stress or anxiety, to severe tremor that has a significant impact on activities of daily living. Tremor severity can vary based on the activity being performed, the position of the body part, and the presence of stress or fatigue. The tremor may worsen over time and may spread to parts of the body not previously affected.

## Who develops ET?

ET is estimated to affect up to 10 million people in the United States and many more worldwide. Men and women are equally affected and it occurs in people of all races. Although ET is most commonly



Although commonly seen in older adults, essential tremor can occur at any age. Ryan Brown was diagnosed at four years old.

seen in older adults, it may occur at any age from childhood to late adulthood. ET is hereditary in more than 50 percent of cases. It appears to be an autosomal dominant disease in many families with ET, which means that a child of a person with ET has a 50 percent chance of inheriting the disorder. Consequently, ET has been referred to as familial tremor. ET has also been called benign tremor, which is misleading, as ET is commonly a source of frustration or social embarrassment, and in some cases can be disabling.

## What causes ET?

The cause of ET is currently unknown. It is thought to be related to abnormal functioning of the part of the brain called the cerebellum or a chemical in the brain called GABA; however, no specific brain abnormalities have been confirmed. Although a large percentage of persons with ET have a family history of the disorder, a specific gene for ET has not been identified, and therefore no genetic test for ET is currently available. Many patients have no family history, so researchers are also searching for possible environmental factors.

## How is ET diagnosed?

To avoid a misdiagnosis, it is important that you see a doctor who has been trained to diagnose and treat tremor. It is best to see a neurologist who specializes in movement disorders. There are no medical tests to confirm the diagnosis of ET. It is diagnosed by medical history and neurological examination. The neurological exam generally includes an examination of tremor in various body parts in different positions as well as completion of writing samples, pouring, and drawing Archimedes spirals, after which the physician evaluates symptoms and rules out other potential causes of tremor such as:

- medication side effects,
- thyroid disease,
- excessive stress or trauma,
- excessive use of caffeine or other stimulants,
- presence of other movement disorders such as Parkinson's disease (PD) and dystonia.



Archimedes spiral drawn by a patient receiving no medication.



Archimedes spiral drawn by a patient receiving a trial dose of a medication.



Archimedes spiral drawn by a patient receiving a more effective dose of the same medication.

*ET is diagnosed by medical history and neurological evaluation.*

## Nonmotor Symptoms of ET

By definition, essential tremor is a monosymptomatic disease with tremor being the only symptom. However, there is increasing awareness of more complex presentations. A number of nonmotor symptoms are described. These include cognitive impairment, apathy, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances and abnormalities in hearing and smell. Mild cognitive impairment may be seen in older ET patients beyond that expected for age. Verbal fluency and verbal recall may be impaired. Cognitive impairment tends to be less severe in ET in comparison to Parkinson's disease (PD). Anxiety and depression are also seen in many ET patients. Hearing loss is more frequent in ET than age-matched controls. Olfactory function, on the other hand, appears to be less affected compared to PD. Excessive daytime sleepiness is also seen in ET.

While definite pathological correlates have not been determined for these nonmotor symptoms, their presence does support the understanding of ET as a neurodegenerative disease.

Appropriate clinical examination of ET patients should include evaluation of cognition, depression, anxiety and sleep disorders using appropriate rating scales.

## How do I prepare for an ET neurological evaluation?

During the neurological evaluation, the doctor will ask you for complete medical and family history and specific information about your tremor. Here are some questions the doctor may ask during your visit:

- Do you have a family history of tremor?
- Does anyone in your family shake for any reason?
- When did you first notice any type of shaking (tremor) and did it begin after a particular incident?
- What parts of your body are affected?
- Did the tremor start suddenly?
- Has the tremor worsened over time?
- Are there specific factors that make your tremor worse such as stress, caffeine, or alcohol intake?
- What effect does alcohol have on your tremor shortly after ingestion, and the following morning?
- Have you ever had a head injury?
- What activities are most affected by your tremor?
- What medications—over-the-counter, vitamins, herbal supplements, and prescriptions—are you taking and what

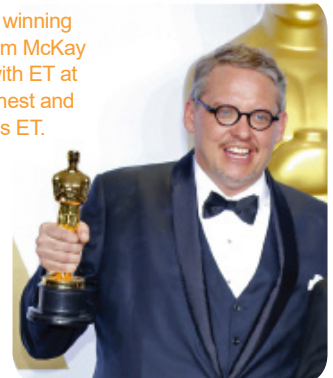
medications have you taken in the past? (Certain medications may cause tremor, so it's a good idea to bring a list of the medications you are taking or the pill containers themselves. It is also helpful to list any medications you have taken in the past.)

## What are other causes of tremor?

Although ET is the most common cause of tremor, there are other potential causes. Some additional causes of tremor include:

- **Enhanced physiologic tremor** – Everyone has a mild, barely detectable tremor referred to as a physiologic tremor. During situations causing stress, fear, anger, anxiety, or fatigue this tremor may become noticeable and is referred to as enhanced physiologic tremor.
- **Drug-induced tremor** – Tremor can be a side effect of prescription medications, such as beta-adrenoceptor agonists, valproic acid, thyroxine, tricyclic antidepressants, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors

Academy award winning writer/director Adam McKay was diagnosed with ET at age 26. He is honest and open about his ET.



amiodarone, procainamide, methylxanthines, antipsychotics, and lithium among others. Some over-the-counter medications, supplements, herbal remedies, and illegal drugs may also cause tremor.

- **Post-traumatic tremor** – An injury to the head can cause tremor.
- **Other neurological disorders** – Other than ET, the most common neurological disorders causing tremor are Parkinson's disease and dystonia (involuntary muscle contractions), but tremor may also occur with multiple sclerosis or after a stroke.

## Do I have ET or Parkinson's disease?

It is often difficult to differentiate ET from Parkinson's disease (PD), particularly during the early stages of the disease. Consequently, many people are initially misdiagnosed. And to complicate the situation, it is possible to have more than one neurological disorder. A small percentage of patients may develop PD after having ET for many years. Here are some basic differences between ET and PD:

- **Type of tremor** – The tremor in ET generally occurs with action, either while performing a movement (kinetic tremor) or while holding the body part in a position against gravity such as having the arms outstretched in front of the body (postural tremor). The tremor of PD most commonly occurs when the body part is at rest and not being used (resting tremor).
- **Additional symptoms** – The primary symptom of ET is tremor. Although tremor is also a symptom of PD, additional features,



This is Natalie Kusilek and her daughter, Teri. Connected with the IETF in 1999, Natalie has struggled to find a treatment option that helps control her head tremor.

such as slowness, stiffness, balance problems, and shuffling gait are also generally present.

- **Body parts affected by tremor** – ET and PD both involve tremor of the arms/hands, but head and voice tremor most commonly appear in ET and almost never in PD.
- **Handwriting** – In ET, handwriting is often large and shaky, whereas in PD, handwriting is often very small (micrographia).
- **Family history** – People with ET often have a family history of tremor, whereas in PD, family history of PD or tremor is much less common.
- **Alcohol** – ET is often reduced by drinking alcohol whereas in PD, alcohol generally does not improve tremor.
- **Medications** – ET generally does not respond to medications used for PD, and PD generally does not respond to medications used for ET.

## What is DaTscan® and how can it help me?

**DaTscan®** is a neuroimaging tool (brain scan) that can assist in differentiating ET and PD, but it does not provide a definitive diagnosis for either disease. In cases where a neurological examination is not sufficient to make a diagnosis of either ET or PD, DaTscan may be helpful.

PD is related to a decrease in a chemical in the brain called dopamine. DaTscan® produces a picture of the brain using single photon emission computed tomography (SPECT), to measure dopamine transporter levels. In PD, a reduction in dopamine transporter levels is seen, whereas in ET the scan is normal.

**Figure 1** compares the normal comma-shaped appearance on both sides of the brain of the DaTscan in ET (left) with the period-shaped appearance of the DaTscan in PD (right) due to reduced dopamine transporter levels. It is important to understand that a normal DaTscan does not confirm a diagnosis of ET; it only helps to rule out a diagnosis of parkinsonism.

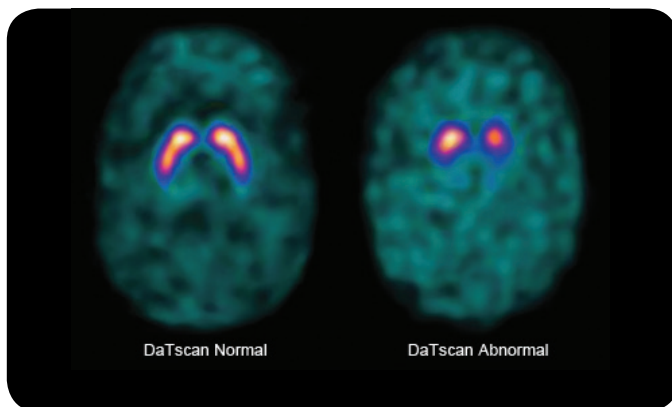


Figure 1

## What therapies are available for ET?

While a cure for ET has not yet been found, medications may help improve your quality of life. If your ET is mild and not bothersome to you, you may not need treatment. However, if ET interferes with your ability to work, perform daily activities, or interact socially, you may want to consider available therapies. The goal of treatment is to reduce the severity of tremor to improve daily functioning such as eating, drinking, writing, and typing, as well as to reduce social embarrassment.

Medications are estimated to be effective for about 50 percent of patients, but they rarely eliminate tremor; therefore, it is important for you to have realistic expectations about drug therapy. Patients respond differently to the various treatment options, so it may take time to find the treatment that is best for you. You may need to try more than one treatment or use a combination of treatments before you and your physician find what works best for you. Do not make changes to your medications without talking with your physician.

### First-line therapies

#### Propranolol (Inderal®, Inderal-LA®)

Propranolol is currently the only medication approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for the treatment of ET. Propranolol is in a class of drugs called beta-blockers, which are used primarily for treating high blood pressure. These drugs block adrenaline in the nervous system; however, it is not clear exactly how propranolol works in treating ET. Propranolol is effective in reducing tremor in approximately 50 to 60 percent of persons with ET.



Your doctor may prescribe propranolol to be taken as needed, such as during particularly stressful situations, or it may be taken daily if your disability is persistent. Tremor reduction generally occurs one to two hours after a single 10 to 40 milligram (mg) dose, and the effect generally lasts about four hours. A once-daily, long-acting preparation is also available. Although propranolol is most effective for hand tremor, it may also be effective for head and voice tremor. Individual response varies, and complete tremor reduction is rare. Side effects of propranolol are usually mild and are more frequent at higher doses (more than 120 mg/day). The main side effects are decreased pulse rate and low blood pressure. Less common side effects are fatigue, depression, impotence, nausea, weight gain, rash, and diarrhea. If you experience unpleasant side effects, be sure to talk with your doctor. If you have heart failure, diabetes mellitus, or asthma, you should talk with your general medical doctor before you take propranolol.

Propranolol is typically started in divided doses from 10 to 60 mg/day. While most patients benefit from doses less than 120 mg/day, the daily dose can be increased up to 320 mg if necessary. No additional benefit has been seen in doses greater than 320 mg/day. Older patients should start with 10 mg/day, and the dose should be slowly increased to 80 to 100 mg/day. Propranolol long-acting should be started at 60 mg/day and can be slowly increased to 120 mg/day or higher as needed and tolerated. Do not abruptly stop this medication without first talking with your physician. Other beta-blockers such as atenolol, metoprolol, and nadolol may also be beneficial for ET.

### **Primidone (Mysoline®)**

Primidone is an anti-seizure medicine that is often

*Take your medications exactly as prescribed by your physician.*

used to treat ET. Approximately 60 percent of people with ET are helped by primidone, and the benefit usually lasts 24 hours after each dose. When you first start taking primidone, you may experience nausea, poor balance, dizziness, fatigue, drowsiness, and flu-like symptoms that generally subside after a couple of days.

Consequently, primidone dosage typically starts at 12.5 mg (one quarter of a 50 mg tablet) or 25 mg (half a 50 mg tablet) at bedtime. After one week, the dose can be increased to 50 mg at bedtime. The dose can then be increased by 50 mg a week, typically up to a dose of 250 mg/day or until adequate tremor control is achieved. Doses of up to 750 mg/day provide benefit in some patients. Primidone can be taken as a single dose at bedtime, particularly if sleepiness is a problem, or it can be taken in divided doses throughout the day.

### **Combination of Propranolol and Primidone**

If your tremor is not well controlled by propranolol or by primidone alone, you may experience better results when you take both medicines together.

### **Benzodiazepines**

Clonazepam (Klonopin®), diazepam (Valium®), lorazepam (Ativan®), and alprazolam (Xanax®) are frequently used to treat ET.

If these benzodiazepines are used for long periods in large dosages, they can become addictive. There is also risk of withdrawal symptoms if the drugs are stopped suddenly. These drugs may be

particularly useful in patients who do not respond to other medications or who have associated anxiety. Side effects include sleepiness, dizziness, depression, fatigue, loss of coordination, memory loss, and confusion.

## Second-line therapies

### Gabapentin (Neurontin®)

Gabapentin is an anti-seizure medicine. It has a modest benefit in ET and is often tried when propranolol and primidone are not effective. Gabapentin is generally well tolerated. Side effects include fatigue, slurred speech, drowsiness, impaired balance, and nausea, especially when beginning treatment. The drug has a short duration of action and requires multiple doses a day. In older persons, gabapentin is typically started at 100 mg three times daily; in younger persons it is often started at 300 mg three times daily.

### Topiramate (Topamax®)

Topiramate is an anti-seizure medicine that has been shown to be effective in controlling tremor in some persons with ET. Starting with a low initial dosage and slowly increasing the dosage over time can minimize side effects. Dosages should be started at 25 mg or 50 mg at night for the first week, and increased by 25 to 50 mg/day each week, depending on side effects, up to a total dose of 300 to 400 mg/day. Side effects include numbness or tingling (paresthesia), memory loss, and weight loss. Topiramate should be avoided in patients with a history of kidney stones or glaucoma and should be used with caution in the elderly due to an increased risk of memory problems and confusion.



Elizabeth Guthrie, support group leader and artist, opted for DBS surgery when medications no longer controlled her tremor.

### Mirtazapine (Remeron®)

Mirtazapine is an antidepressant. Due to its lack of effectiveness for the majority of persons with ET and its significant side effects, mirtazapine is not recommended for the routine treatment of ET. Adverse effects include sleepiness, increased appetite/weight gain, dizziness and nausea.

### Botulinum Toxin Injections

If medications fail, you may consider therapy that involves injecting botulinum toxin into the affected muscles. Botulinum toxin injections have been useful in the treatment of some patients with hand, head, and voice tremor. Receiving optimal benefit from botulinum toxin requires a specialist skilled in the technique. The effects last about three to four months and, for continued benefit, must be repeated about three times a year. Transient weakness of the injected muscles is the most common side effect. Be sure to check with your insurance provider about coverage, as this treatment can be expensive.



## Surgical Therapies

If medical treatment is not successful and your tremor continues to cause disability, surgical alternatives might be an option. They include deep brain stimulation (DBS) of the thalamus, radiosurgical thalamotomy and MRI focused ultrasound thalamotomy. You can learn more about surgical treatments for ET at [www.essentialtremor.org/treatments/surgical-treatments](http://www.essentialtremor.org/treatments/surgical-treatments), or contact the IETF office for a flyer.

## What is the effect of alcohol on ET?

Adults with ET often notice that drinking alcohol reduces tremor for one to two hours. When you use alcohol responsibly, it can be very effective in temporarily reducing tremor. It may even be helpful to have one or two drinks during social events to suppress tremor. There are, however, important issues to consider in using alcohol for ET. Rebound tremor may occur after alcohol use, making tremor temporarily more severe the next day. If you use alcohol to reduce tremor, be sure to discuss this with your doctor. You should avoid excessive use of alcohol, and never consume alcohol if you plan to drive. Alcohol is not prescribed as a treatment for ET due to the problems associated with its use: development of tolerance to the anti-tremor effect, increased tremor as alcohol is metabolized, and the risk of alcoholism.

## What else might help me manage my tremor?

While the following have no proven effectiveness for ET, some people with ET have found them to be beneficial:



Musician Brett Wiscons has not let his essential tremor deter him from doing what he loves. His career achievements include sharing the stage with musicians including Jon Bon Jovi, LeAnn Rimes and Collective Soul.

- **Occupational therapy** – An occupational therapist can provide helpful techniques or introduce devices to make living with ET more manageable. Some examples include using heavier utensils, cups, and glasses; wrist weights; plate guards; heavier, wider writing instruments; and other adaptive devices such as a special computer mouse that compensates for tremor, or computer voice recognition programs that greatly reduce the need for typing.
- **Alternative treatments** – Many people have tried treatments such as acupuncture, hypnosis, meditation, yoga, and massage therapy with unconfirmed benefit. These treatments may be particularly helpful in people with anxiety. Biofeedback or behavioral therapy may also be helpful for people dealing with high levels of stress or anxiety. There are currently no specific vitamins or supplements recommended to reduce tremor.

## Practical suggestions

There are many ways to minimize the degree to which ET interferes with your life. Here are some practical suggestions:

- **Learn as much as you can about ET.** You are your own best advocate.
- **ET is commonly misdiagnosed.** Make sure your physician is knowledgeable about ET and is actively working with you to control your tremor. Our website provides a list of physicians with experience treating ET and other movement disorders.
- **Don't hide your tremor.** Talk about it to friends, relatives, and colleagues. Creating greater awareness about your tremor can greatly reduce your anxiety and may consequently reduce your tremor. It will make you more comfortable around others, and they will be more comfortable around you! The more everyone learns about ET, the faster public awareness will increase. Greater awareness will bring attention to ET and facilitate research so additional treatments and a cure can be discovered.

### Acknowledgements

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- **If your child has ET**, you may want to meet with his/her teacher(s) to discuss. Order the free IETF flyer "Children with Essential Tremor: A Guide for Parents and Other Caring Adults" and share it with your child's teacher. "Tremor Disorders in Children: A Clinical Discussion" is an IETF flyer you may want to share with your physician. Visit [www.essentialtremor.org/children-with-essential-tremor](http://www.essentialtremor.org/children-with-essential-tremor) for more information.
- **Avoid things** that may worsen tremor such as caffeine and certain prescription medications.
- **Find coping tips** on the IETF website at [www.essentialtremor.org/coping](http://www.essentialtremor.org/coping).
- **Join a support group** or learn how to become a support group leader. A list of groups is also available on the IETF website: [www.essentialtremor.org/find-a-support-group](http://www.essentialtremor.org/find-a-support-group).

## Resources

**IETF Website:** [www.essentialtremor.org](http://www.essentialtremor.org)

**Facebook Page:** [www.Facebook.com/InternationalEssentialTremorFoundation](http://www.Facebook.com/InternationalEssentialTremorFoundation)

**Twitter:** [www.Twitter.com/EssentialTremor](http://www.Twitter.com/EssentialTremor)

**Instagram:** [www.Instagram.com/EssentialTremorFoundation](http://www.Instagram.com/EssentialTremorFoundation)

**Blog:** [TremorTalk.org](http://TremorTalk.org)

**YouTube Channel:** [Youtube.com/EssentialTremorIETF](http://Youtube.com/EssentialTremorIETF)

# International Essential Tremor Foundation (IETF)

Founded in 1988, the International Essential Tremor Foundation (IETF) provides hope to the essential tremor (ET) community worldwide through awareness, education, support and research. It is the leading organization in the world dedicated to those affected by ET.

This information is not intended to replace your current medical therapy. Discuss your ET and how it impacts you with your physician or other healthcare professional in order to help develop a well-rounded treatment plan that is right for you.



**International Essential  
Tremor Foundation**

*Your Voice for Essential Tremor*

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