

## Essential Tremor

Information and advice for patients

Neurological Rehabilitation Team  
St. Luke's Hospital, Bradford

### What is essential tremor?

Essential Tremor is a common movement disorder that causes involuntary movements in the limbs, and more rarely, in the trunk and head. Sometimes the tremor is mild and remains stable for long periods of time, although generally it gets worse over time. Usually the tremor presents on both sides of the body, although it is often more noticeable in the dominant side, because it is what is known as an 'action tremor' – a tremor that occurs when a muscle is being used. This can lead to problems with many tasks, such as writing, drinking and eating, using a computer, and many other tasks.

### How is essential tremor treated?

Whilst there are medications available to relieve the symptoms, about 50% of individuals do not respond to medication for essential tremor (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke). Research is being conducted to explore alternative treatments that can reduce tremor without impacting on function, however there is currently no cure for essential tremor. Surgical options may be discussed for those with a particularly severe tremor. There are therapies that may help control and manage the everyday challenges of having an essential tremor.

Occupational therapists can help individuals with essential tremor find different ways of doing things, or recommend equipment and adaptations to support daily activities and reduce the impact of essential tremor.

## **What can I do to help myself?**

### **Eating and drinking**

Use heavier glasses or cups for drinking, and don't fill them to the brim. A travel mug with a lid can be easier to carry if you are moving anywhere with your drink. Dishes with a raised edge can be helpful to get the food on to the cutlery. You can also buy special bumper guards for plates. Plastic mats can also be purchased to prevent your plate or bowl from sliding on the table top. Chunkier and heavier cutlery may be easier to use.

### **Washing and dressing**

If the tremor is in your arm, try tucking your elbow in to your side when completing tasks such as brushing teeth, shaving or putting on make-up, as this may reduce the tremor. You may find an electric toothbrush is easier to use as it doesn't require as much movement. Try getting dressed in a seated position. You may want to assess your wardrobe, as zips and small buttons may be difficult. An occupational therapist may be able to provide further help in assistive equipment for washing and dressing.

### **Writing and using a computer**

Rest your wrist and forearm on the table top when writing or typing. Try and use a heavier pen and print rather than joining up handwriting. There are now options to type using speech-to-text on platforms such as Microsoft Office and Google Docs, which reduces the need to type. This feature can be used on mobile smartphones as well.

### **Keeping track of life with an essential tremor**

Keeping a diary, or notes on a calendar can be helpful to monitor the tremor and identify particular things that might trigger the symptoms. This could be noting down what time of day symptoms are better or worse, effects of medication, or the impact of tremor on daily activities. Using a calendar or diary can also help you plan ahead and prioritise activities that are important or meaningful to you, and identify areas where you might need additional support.

### **Mental health and wellbeing**

Essential tremor is a gradually progressive condition, so whilst the changes you experience may happen slowly, they may also become more noticeable to those around you. Whilst it's an entirely individual decision how much you decide to share about the condition, it is important to recognise that engaging in open communication about how the condition affects you and how your needs are changing can help others understand how

they can best support you. Essential tremor is a physical condition, but it can also understandably impact on your emotional wellbeing, confidence, and sometimes your mental health. Sharing your feelings with family, friends and health professionals can be a useful strategy to unburden some of your worries and also help find ways to make adjustments that will help you in your everyday life.

## **Further information**

Further information and support about essential tremor can be found via the National Tremor Foundation. This UK charity also organises support groups which are currently available via Zoom.

Telephone: 01708 386399

[www.tremor.org.uk](http://www.tremor.org.uk)

Information for this leaflet comes from the following sources:

National Tremor Foundation (UK charity) ([www.tremor.org.uk](http://www.tremor.org.uk))

Pilot leaflet developed for The Neurological Rehabilitation Team, St Luke's Hospital 2023