

# A guide to tourette syndrome

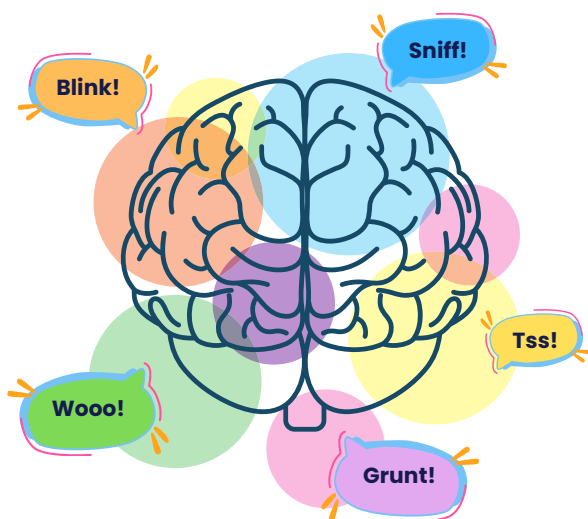
## What is tourette syndrome?

Tourette syndrome is a neurological condition marked by multiple tics – sudden, repetitive, and involuntary movements or sounds. It affects around 1 in 100 school-aged children and is more common in boys. In the UK, more than 300,000 children and adults are living with tourette syndrome. Up to 85% of individuals also experience additional co-occurring conditions, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), and anxiety disorders.



Tourette syndrome is frequently misunderstood as a condition that causes people to swear or say inappropriate things. While 'coprolalia', the clinical term for involuntary swearing, can occur in tourette syndrome, it affects only about 10–20% of those with the condition.

## Other tic disorders



Tourette syndrome sits within a group of conditions known as tic disorders. Other conditions along this spectrum include:

- Transient (provisional) tic disorder – Involves motor tics, typically affecting the face and neck, though other areas of the body can be involved. Vocal tics may also occur. These tics last only a few weeks or months.
- Chronic tic disorder – Characterised by either motor tics or vocal tics (but not both) that continue for more than one year.
- Tourette syndrome – Defined by the presence of multiple motor tics and at least one vocal tic for a minimum of 12 months, though they may not happen at the same time.
- Unspecified tic disorder – Tics are present but do not fully meet the diagnostic criteria for a particular tic disorder

# Traits of tourette syndrome

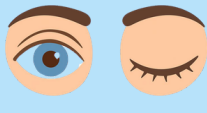
Tics typically begin in childhood, most often around 6 or 7 years of age. Their severity and frequency tend to vary over time. While tics naturally wax and wane, changes can also be influenced by environmental factors such as stress, excitement, or even relaxation.

Tics can affect almost any part of the body and involve a wide range of muscles. Some people also describe “internal tics,” such as deep abdominal muscle tension or sensations in the stomach. Tics are generally grouped into two categories: simple and complex.

| Motor tics                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | vs | Vocal tics                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Simple tics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• eye blinking</li><li>• nose twitching</li><li>• facial grimacing</li><li>• head jerking</li><li>• shoulder shrugging</li><li>• neck stretching</li><li>• rapid hand or arm movements</li><li>• abdominal tensing</li></ul>                                                                                                        |    | <b>Simple tics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• throat clearing</li><li>• grunting</li><li>• sniffing</li><li>• barking</li><li>• coughing</li><li>• humming</li><li>• whistling</li><li>• clicking noises</li></ul>                                                                                                            |
| <b>Complex tics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• touching objects or other people</li><li>• hopping or skipping</li><li>• twirling around</li><li>• making obscene gestures (copropraxia)</li><li>• mimicking others' movements (echopraxia)</li><li>• stomping</li><li>• bending or twisting the body</li><li>• repeating a series of movements in a specific sequence</li></ul> |    | <b>Complex tics</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• repeating others' words or phrases (echolalia)</li><li>• repeating own words or phrases (palilalia)</li><li>• involuntary utterance or inappropriate or obscene words (coprolalia)</li><li>• grunting</li><li>• barking</li><li>• sniffing</li><li>• throat clearing</li></ul> |

Many people feel a physical sensation beforehand, called a premonitory urge. It can feel like needing to itch or sneeze, or like a burning or electric sensation. Suppressing a tic can intensify the urge, while performing it brings temporary relief. Sometimes the movement or sound must be repeated until it feels complete and the urge fades.

**Examples of motor tics**



Hopping

Blinking

Twirling around

**Examples of vocal tics**



Grunting

Repetitive throat clearing

Barking

## Can tics be controlled?

Although tics are involuntary, many people can suppress them briefly like holding back a blink until the urge becomes too strong. Suppression takes concentration and varies by person, but some control can improve with practice.

Children with tourette syndrome often hold in tics at school, then release them at home. The structured school environment can encourage suppression, while home feels more relaxed and comfortable.

## Causes of tourette syndrome

The exact cause of tourette syndrome isn't fully known, but research shows differences in brain motor circuits and imbalances in neurotransmitters, especially dopamine. Many tic-reducing medications target this system. It often runs in families, suggesting a genetic link, though no single gene or test exists. Tic severity can also temporarily increase during illness or infection.

## How to support in your unit

- Educate yourself about tourette syndrome
- Speak with parents or carers beforehand about the child's specific tics and any co-occurring conditions. Ask what strategies work well at school or home.
- Complete an [adjustment plan](#) if needed
- Treat tics as neutral by avoiding drawing attention to them.
- Model calm, matter-of-fact responses so other children follow your lead, and establish a clear culture of respect and kindness.
- Create a safe space they can go if they would prefer to let out their tics in private.
- Reduce stress and pressure by giving advanced warning, clear instructions, and avoid putting them on the spot unless they are comfortable. A [visual timetable](#) may help.
- Encourage the use of aids if they are used at school/home, and allow extra time if there is reading/writing tasks. Tics can make handwriting difficult.
- Access [further support](#) if needed.

Remember you can get help with the costs for inclusive materials and resources. This may be available in your country and region, or with the [accessible guiding grant](#) from HQ.

Most importantly, remember that the child is not choosing their tics. Feeling accepted and safe can significantly reduce stress, and often helps reduce tic severity as well.

## Useful contacts

<https://www.tourettes-action.org.uk/>

