

# When Tics Increase

## Stress, excitement, tiredness and other factors

Tourette syndrome and other tic disorders can be changeable. A person may have a relatively quiet morning and a much more tic-heavy afternoon, or experience a period when familiar tics become stronger, more frequent or are joined by new ones. This waxing and waning is a recognised feature of tics. Changes do not mean the person is exaggerating, failing to cope or deliberately producing the tic. Understanding what may be happening around an increase can make support calmer and more useful.

## Stress can influence tics

Stress is commonly reported as something that can make tics more noticeable. This does not mean stress causes Tourette syndrome. Rather, the nervous system may be dealing with additional demands at the same time as the person is managing urges, movements and sounds. Stress can come from obvious difficulties, but also from deadlines, social pressure, conflict, transitions, uncertainty or trying hard to suppress tics.

## Excitement can do it too

Tics are not only associated with difficult emotions. Positive excitement, anticipation, laughter, celebrations, games, holidays or seeing somebody important can also coincide with an increase. This matters because an increase in tics should not automatically be read as evidence that the person is anxious or unhappy.

**More tics do not always mean something is wrong. Sometimes the nervous system is simply responding to more stimulation, emotion or demand.**

## Tiredness and lack of recovery

Fatigue can make it harder for some people to manage urges or use strategies they normally find helpful. A long school or work day, poor sleep, travel, illness or sustained concentration can all leave less energy available. The person may need reduced demands and recovery rather than being encouraged to 'try harder' to control the tic.

## Anxiety and anticipation

Anxiety can increase internal tension and may coincide with more frequent or intense tics. Sometimes the anxiety is about the tics themselves - for example, worrying about ticcing during an exam, meeting, performance or quiet environment. Fear of other people's reactions can then add another layer of pressure. A supportive response reduces attention and judgement rather than making the person more self-conscious.

## Illness and physical strain

Being unwell, in pain or physically depleted can alter a person's usual pattern. Fever, infection, headaches, muscle soreness, poor sleep or general exhaustion may all make coping more difficult. New or concerning symptoms should not automatically be attributed to Tourette syndrome. Seek appropriate medical advice where there is significant pain, injury, breathing difficulty, loss of consciousness or another worrying change.

## Changes in routine

Unexpected changes, transitions and unfamiliar environments can increase demand. This can include a substitute teacher, different journey, change of room, family event, new workplace task or disrupted daily routine. Predictability, preparation and clear information may reduce some of the additional strain, particularly where the person also has sensory or neurodevelopmental differences.

## Sensory overload

Noise, crowds, bright lighting, touch, temperature, smells or multiple competing demands may become overwhelming for some people. Tourette syndrome can occur alongside ADHD, OCD and other neurodevelopmental or mental-health difficulties, so it is important to understand the whole person rather than assuming every response is caused by tics. Where sensory load is relevant, quieter spaces, headphones where appropriate, movement, fewer simultaneous demands or time to recover may help.

## Sometimes there is no obvious trigger

Not every increase has an identifiable explanation. Tics naturally wax and wane, and searching relentlessly for a cause can make the person feel watched or responsible. Tracking can be useful when the person wants it and when there is a practical reason, but it should not become another pressure.

## What helps when tics suddenly increase?

Stay calm and avoid making the tic the centre of attention. Reduce unnecessary demands. Ask whether the person wants space, company, movement, quiet or simply for everyone to carry on normally. If they have an established support plan, follow it. Allow recovery after a demanding day and remember that the person's needs may differ from one episode to another.

## At school or work

An increase in tics may temporarily affect writing, speaking, concentration, sitting still, using equipment, attending meetings or completing timed tasks. Reasonable flexibility can include breaks, extra time, alternative ways to complete a task, a quieter space or permission to leave and return. Support should be based on functional impact, not on how disruptive the tic looks to somebody else.

## Helpful responses

| Instead of...                        | Try...                                       |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| "What's caused this?"                | "Is there anything making today harder?"     |
| "Calm down and your tics will stop." | "Would reducing some of the pressure help?"  |
| "You were fine yesterday."           | "I know tics can change from day to day."    |
| "Try not to do that here."           | "What would make this space easier for you?" |

## A gentle pattern tracker

If the person wants to understand their own pattern, they might notice sleep, energy, major changes, sensory load, stress, excitement and where they felt able to tic freely. The purpose is curiosity, not blame. A tracker should be stopped if it increases anxiety or makes the person feel constantly observed.

## A message

Your tics are allowed to have louder days and quieter days. You do not have to explain every increase or find a perfect reason for it. Sometimes your body is tired, excited, overloaded, stressed or simply doing what tics do - changing. Support should adapt with you rather than expecting you to remain the same every day.

## UK information and support

NHS information explains Tourette syndrome, tics and treatment. Tourette's Action provides UK information and practical resources for individuals, families, education and workplaces.

## Sources

NHS: Tourette syndrome; Tics; Tics - Treatment (accessed September 2026). Tourette's Action: Symptoms of TS and information resources on managing Tourette syndrome (accessed September 2026). This guide is for information and support and is not a substitute for individual medical assessment or treatment.