

What is compulsive hoarding?

Compulsive hoarding is a disorder characterized by difficulty discarding items that appear to most people to have little or no value. This leads to an accumulation of clutter, such that living and workspaces cannot be used for their intended purposes. The clutter can result in serious threats to the health and safety of the sufferer and those who live nearby. Often people with compulsive hoarding also acquire too many items—either free or purchased. Compulsive hoarding tends to be a chronic disorder, and if left untreated, it usually worsens over time.

Typical behaviors seen in compulsive hoarding include:

- Avoiding throwing away possessions (common hoarded items are newspapers, magazines, paper and plastic bags, cardboard boxes, photographs, household supplies, food and clothing)
- Experiencing severe anxiety about discarding possessions
- Having trouble making decisions about organizing possessions
- Feeling overwhelmed or embarrassed by possessions
- Being suspicious of other people touching possessions
- Having obsessive thoughts about possessions:
 - Being afraid of running out of an item and needing it later
 - Checking the garbage to see if an item was accidentally discarded

- Possible functional impairments:
 - Loss of living space inside the home (no place to eat, sleep, or cook)
 - Social isolation
 - Family or marital problems
 - Financial difficulties
 - Health hazards

What causes compulsive hoarding?

Compulsive hoarding may be hereditary. Up to 85% of people with compulsive hoarding can identify another family member who has this problem. Abnormal brain development and brain lesions may also play a role. Compulsive hoarding can be associated with brain damage, such as strokes, surgery, injuries or infections. Family experiences and psychological factors may also play a role in the development of hoarding and emotional stress may heighten symptoms.

Research indicates that people with the compulsive hoarding syndrome have unique abnormalities of brain function that are different from those seen in people with non-hoarding obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and those with no psychiatric problems. However, what causes these brain abnormalities has not been determined.

All people with significant hoarding behaviors should receive thorough assessment to evaluate possible causes of hoarding behavior, determine the correct diagnosis and develop an appropriate treatment plan.

How disabling is compulsive hoarding?

The clutter that accumulates in the homes of people who hoard is often a serious fire risk. These homes are also frequently vulnerable to infestation from rodents, insects and molds, which can put residents of the home at risk for various health problems, including asthma, allergies and infections.

Family members are often frustrated by the gradual worsening of symptoms and the extent of the person's impairment. They often want very much to help but feel powerless to do so. They may become angry at the person's inability to clean or discard clutter, not understanding that this is not possible without treatment.

What treatments are available for compulsive hoarding?

Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT)—This technique decreases excessive fears of making decisions, losing important possessions, throwing things away, and organizing saved items out of sight, by gradual exposure to tasks that provoke these fears. Patients are encouraged to resist urges to engage in usual behaviors, such as postponing decision making, saving things “just in case,” or putting things in piles rather than storing them. This ultimately results in a decrease in anxiety, avoidance and compulsive behaviors, and changes the way people with compulsive hoarding think about their possessions.

CBT for compulsive hoarding can be effectively performed either in someone's home or in a therapist's office setting.

Medication—Drugs with potent effects on the brain chemical serotonin have proven effective.

Serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SRIs) are highly effective and FDA-approved for treatment of OCD, but it's not clear whether they are as effective for compulsive hoarding as for other OCD symptoms. Very few studies have tested SRI's or other medications specifically for treatment of compulsive hoarding. Some studies have found that SRIs are beneficial for compulsive hoarding, while others found that hoarding symptoms were associated with poor response to SRIs.

If someone does not have an adequate response to SRIs, adding other types of medications can often help to improve response. New medications and new combinations of medications are available, giving reason for greater hope in the future.

A combination of medication and CBT appears to be the most effective treatment regimen for most people with the compulsive hoarding syndrome.

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John D. Archbold Memorial Hospital

**Archbold Northside Center
for Behavioral and Psychiatric Care
401 Old Albany Road
Thomasville, Georgia 31792**

(229) 228-8208

24-Hour HELpline (800) 238-8661

www.archbold.org/northside

