SYMPTOM

Tremor or shaking hands

A hand tremor is shaking that you cannot fully control in one or both hands.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
My hands shake without me meaning them to

WHERE IT IS FELT
One or both hands, sometimes the arms

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Stress or tiredness, caffeine, essential tremor

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Sudden shaking with weakness, confusion, or trouble speaking

USUALLY LASTS
Minutes to years, based on the trigger or condition

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Persistent, worsening, or interfering with everyday tasks

Overview

A tremor is a repeated shaking movement that you do not fully control. It may affect one hand, both hands, or other parts of the body. The shaking can be mild and occasional or noticeable enough to interfere with writing, eating, dressing, or holding a cup.

Many things can cause shaky hands. Temporary triggers include stress, tiredness, caffeine, and some medicines. A tremor can also come from a longer-term condition, such as essential tremor. Essential tremor is a movement disorder that commonly causes shaking during actions such as reaching or pouring.

The pattern, timing, and other symptoms are important. A healthcare professional can assess these details without assuming that the tremor has one particular cause.

What it may feel or look like

You may notice small, rhythmic movements of your fingers, hands, or arms. The shaking may be more obvious when you are nervous, tired, hungry, or trying to do something precise.

A tremor can happen:

It may affect one side more than the other. Some people also have shaking in the head, jaw, or voice. Other symptoms, such as stiffness, weakness, poor balance, sweating, or a racing heartbeat, can help point toward the cause.

- At rest , when your hand is relaxed
- While holding a position , such as stretching out your arms
- During movement , such as writing, using cutlery, or lifting a glass
- Near a target , becoming stronger as your finger approaches an object

Common causes

Normal muscle activity can become more visible under certain conditions. This is sometimes called an enhanced physiological tremor. Common triggers include:

Essential tremor is another common cause. It often affects both hands during movement or while holding the arms out. It may run in families, but not everyone has an affected relative. It is different from Parkinson's disease.

Medicines can also cause or worsen shaking. Examples include some asthma medicines, antidepressants like sertraline or fluoxetine , mood medicines, stimulants, and thyroid hormone. Do not stop a prescribed medicine suddenly. A clinician or pharmacist can check whether it could be contributing.

Less common causes include an overactive thyroid, low blood sugar, alcohol or sedative withdrawal, and conditions affecting the brain or nerves. Parkinson's disease can cause tremor, but shaking hands alone does not mean that you have it. Parkinson's usually causes other movement changes, such as slowness or stiffness.

- Stress, anxiety, excitement, or pain
- Lack of sleep or physical exhaustion
- Caffeine, nicotine, or other stimulants like methylphenidate or lisdexamfetamine
- Feeling very cold
- Going a long time without eating

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if shaking begins suddenly with:

These symptoms may indicate a stroke or another serious problem. Do not drive yourself for emergency care.

Urgent medical help is also appropriate if shaking follows a suspected poisoning or medicine overdose. If a person with diabetes has shaking with confusion, cannot swallow safely, becomes unconscious, or has a seizure, treat this as an emergency.

Seek same-day medical advice for a new tremor with fever, marked confusion, severe agitation, or a very fast heartbeat. Shaking after suddenly stopping heavy alcohol use or a sedative medicine also needs urgent assessment because withdrawal can become dangerous.

Book a routine appointment if the tremor:

- Weakness or numbness on one side
- A drooping face or trouble speaking
- Severe confusion, collapse, or a seizure
- A sudden severe headache or major difficulty walking
- Persists, worsens, or keeps returning
- Affects eating, drinking, writing, work, or personal care
- Started after a new medicine or dose change
- Comes with stiffness, slowed movement, balance problems, or weight loss
- Is causing distress or making you avoid activities

How the cause is found

A healthcare professional will ask when the shaking began, what brings it on, and whether it happens at rest or during movement. They may ask about caffeine, alcohol, sleep, stress, medical conditions, and medicines or supplements.

During an examination, you may be asked to hold out your arms, write, draw a spiral, pour water, or touch a target. The clinician may also check your strength, reflexes, coordination, walking, and thyroid gland.

Blood tests are not always needed. Depending on your symptoms, tests may check blood sugar, thyroid function, or other possible causes. Brain imaging is generally reserved for people whose history or examination suggests a structural problem, such as a stroke or injury.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on what is causing the tremor and how much it affects you. A mild tremor that is not interfering with daily life may only need monitoring.

It may help to:

Keep a brief record of when the tremor occurs, what you were doing, and any medicines or caffeine taken beforehand. A short video can also help if the shaking is not present during your appointment.

Do not use alcohol as a tremor treatment. Although it may briefly reduce some tremors, regular use creates other health risks, and withdrawal can worsen shaking.

If a medicine is contributing, a prescriber may adjust or replace it. Essential tremor can sometimes be treated with prescription medicines. For severe tremor that remains disabling, specialist options may include injections or procedures that target the brain circuits involved in movement.

- Reduce caffeine and other stimulants, especially if they worsen shaking
- Eat regular meals and get enough sleep
- Use stress-management methods such as paced breathing
- Support your elbows when drinking or doing detailed tasks
- Try heavier utensils, lidded cups, or voice-to-text tools

What to expect

A tremor caused by stress, caffeine, tiredness, cold, or hunger may improve when the trigger passes. Medicine-related shaking may improve after a clinician safely changes the treatment, although the timing depends on the medicine.

Long-term conditions such as essential tremor may remain stable for years or gradually become more noticeable. Treatment aims to reduce its effect on daily activities rather than guarantee that all shaking will stop.

Follow-up is useful if the pattern changes, new symptoms appear, or treatment is not helping enough. Occupational therapy may also help you find practical ways to write, cook, dress, or use devices more comfortably.

Common questions

Does shaking mean I have Parkinson's disease?

No. Parkinson's is only one possible cause, and hand tremor is often caused by something else. The timing of the tremor and the presence of stiffness, slowness, or balance changes help with assessment.

Can anxiety make my hands shake?

Yes. Stress and anxiety release hormones that can make normal muscle activity more visible. However, persistent shaking should not automatically be attributed to anxiety without considering other causes.

Why is the shaking worse when I hold a cup?

Some tremors are most noticeable while holding a position or making a controlled movement. This pattern can occur with enhanced physiological tremor or essential tremor, among other causes.

Should I stop a medicine that may be causing tremor?

Not without professional advice. Stopping some medicines suddenly can cause withdrawal or allow the condition being treated to worsen. Ask a prescriber or pharmacist to review it.

Sources

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