

# PANS/PANDAS and Suicide Prevention

Pediatric Acute-onset Neuropsychiatric Syndrome (PANS) and Pediatric Autoimmune Neuropsychiatric Disorder Associated with Streptococcal Infections (PANDAS) are medical conditions that can cause sudden, severe changes in a child or teen's behavior, emotions, and thinking. Symptoms may appear quickly and resemble a mental health crisis, including intense anxiety, mood changes, or suicidal thoughts. Though caused by immune system dysfunction affecting the brain, these conditions often present as psychiatric emergencies. Early recognition is critical to prevent misdiagnosis, delays in care, and avoidable harm.<sup>1</sup>

## What Are PANS and PANDAS?<sup>2</sup>

- **PANS** is a clinical diagnosis marked by the sudden onset of obsessive-compulsive symptoms or severe eating restriction, along with at least two additional neuropsychiatric symptoms such as anxiety, depression, irritability, or cognitive changes. Triggers may include infections, inflammation, metabolic issues, or environmental factors.
- **PANDAS** is a subset of PANS that occurs after a Group A streptococcal infection (such as strep throat), when the immune system mistakenly affects the brain, particularly areas controlling behavior and emotions.

## Causes<sup>3</sup>

PANS and PANDAS occur when the immune system reacts in ways that affect the brain.

- PANDAS is most commonly linked to strep infections.
- Inflammation caused by the immune response can disrupt normal brain function.
- Other infections, physical stress on the body, or environmental factors may also trigger symptoms.

## Common Symptoms

*In more severe cases, individuals may experience thoughts of self-harm or engage in unsafe behaviors.<sup>3</sup>*

### SYMPTOMS OF PANS AND PANDAS OFTEN APPEAR SUDDENLY AND MAY BE SEVERE.

Sudden onset of obsessive-compulsive behaviors

Emotional lability, rage episodes, or extreme irritability

Sleep disturbances and persistent fatigue

Severe anxiety, panic attacks, or separation anxiety

Depression, social withdrawal, or personality changes

Trouble concentrating or academic regression

## Additional Resources

[Alliance to Solve PANS & Immune-Related Encephalopathies \(ASPIRE\)](#)  
- Aspire to improve the lives of children and adults affected by PANS/PANDAS and other immune-related encephalopathies by closing the gap between symptom onset and access to treatment and support.

[PANDAS Network](#) - Dedicated to improving the diagnosis and treatment of children with PANDAS and PANS.

[Child Mind Institute: Complete Guide to PANS and PANDAS](#) - How to recognize these forms of severe, acute-onset OCD, how they are diagnosed, and the recommended treatments.

*Early recognition, validation, and coordinated support can save lives.*

## Why PANS and PANDAS Are Often Misunderstood<sup>4</sup>

PANS and PANDAS are frequently misunderstood or dismissed because their symptoms closely resemble primary mental health conditions and can appear suddenly, without warning. Families may be told symptoms are “behavioral,” “psychological,” or typical adolescent changes, despite a clear and dramatic shift from a child’s previous functioning. Because there is no single definitive test and awareness varies among providers, diagnosis and appropriate treatment are often delayed. This lack of recognition can leave children without needed care and caregivers feeling blamed, unheard, or unsupported.

Improving awareness and understanding helps reduce stigma, shorten time to diagnosis, and ensure children receive timely, coordinated medical and mental health support.

## Mental Health, Self-Harm, and Suicide Prevention Connection<sup>1</sup>

Children and adolescents with PANS and PANDAS may experience sudden, intense psychiatric symptoms that are frightening, disorienting, and overwhelming. Rapid-onset depression, intrusive thoughts, emotional dysregulation, and loss of impulse control can significantly increase the risk of self-harm and suicidal ideation.

These symptoms are biologically driven, not typical adolescent behavior. Misinterpreting them as primary mental illness without considering immune involvement can delay appropriate treatment, prolong distress, and increase risk.

### A suicide prevention–informed approach emphasizes:

- Validating the child’s experience
- Recognizing medical contributors to psychiatric crises
- Coordinating care between medical and mental health providers
- Supporting caregivers who may feel overwhelmed

## Treatment and Support

Early diagnosis and coordinated care between medical and mental health providers are critical. With timely treatment, many children improve, and the risk for severe psychiatric crises is reduced. Families should work with healthcare providers experienced in PANS/PANDAS and advocate for coordinated care to ensure their child receives the most effective treatment.<sup>5</sup>

### Treatments may include:

- Antibiotics to treat or prevent infections
- Immunomodulatory therapies
- Supportive mental health care, such as therapy for anxiety, OCD, or mood symptoms

## References

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2. PANS | PPN. Published October 18, 2018. <https://www.pandasppn.org/pans/>
3. Understanding PANDAS. PANDAS Network. <https://pandasnetwork.org/understanding-pandas/>
4. Myths and Misinformation About PANDAS. PANDAS Network. Published February 21, 2022. <https://pandasnetwork.org/pandas-myths-misinformation/>
5. ASPIRE: Treating PANS PANDAS. Aspire. Published August 30, 2024. <https://aspire.care/treating-pans-treating-pans-pandas/>

## ABOUT OHIO SUICIDE PREVENTION FOUNDATION

Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation (OSPF) educates, advocates for, and builds connections and support for individuals, families, and communities to prevent suicide.



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