**Claustrophobia**

**Claustrophobia is the irrational fear of confined spaces.**

People affected by claustrophobia will often go out of their way to avoid confined spaces, such as lifts, tunnels, tube trains and public toilets. But avoiding these places may reinforce the fear.

Some people with claustrophobia experience mild [anxiety](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/anxiety-fear-panic/) when in a confined space, while others have severe anxiety or a panic attack.

It's estimated around 10% of the UK population are affected by claustrophobia during their lifetime.

**Triggers of claustrophobia**

Many different situations or feelings can trigger claustrophobia. Even thinking about certain situations without exposure to them could be a trigger.

Common triggers of claustrophobia include:

* lifts
* tunnels
* tube trains
* public toilets
* rooms where the doors have to be locked
* cars
* hotel rooms with sealed windows
* planes

If you have felt anxious in the last 6 months about being in a confined space or crowded place, or you have avoided these situations for this reason, it's likely that you're affected by claustrophobia.

**MRI scan anxiety**

If you have claustrophobia and need to have an [MRI scan](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/mri-scan/), let the staff at the hospital know before the day of your appointment.

You can talk to your consultant about having a sedative to help you relax. You should do this well in advance of having the scan.

In some cases, you may be able to attend an open or upright MRI centre, designed for people with severe MRI anxiety. But these clinics are often only available privately.

**Symptoms of claustrophobia**

People with claustrophobia can have [panic attacks](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/anxiety/). They can be very frightening and distressing.

As well as overwhelming feelings of anxiety, claustrophobia can also cause physical symptoms, such as:

* sweating
* trembling
* [hot flushes](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause/hot-flushes/) or chills
* [shortness of breath](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/shortness-of-breath/) or difficulty breathing
* a choking sensation
* a rapid heartbeat (tachycardia)
* [chest pain](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/chest-pain/) or a feeling of tightness in the chest
* a sensation of butterflies in the stomach
* feeling sick
* [headaches](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/headaches/) and dizziness
* feeling faint
* numbness or [pins and needles](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pins-and-needles/)
* a [dry mouth](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/dry-mouth/)
* a need to go to the toilet
* ringing in your ears
* feeling confused or disorientated

If you have severe claustrophobia, you may also experience psychological symptoms, such as:

* fear of losing control
* fear of fainting
* feelings of being detached from your body
* fear of dying

**What causes claustrophobia?**

Claustrophobia is often caused by a traumatic event experienced during early childhood.

For example, adults may develop claustrophobia if, as a child, they:

* were trapped or kept in a confined space
* were bullied or abused
* had a parent with claustrophobia

Claustrophobia can also be triggered by unpleasant experiences or situations, such as turbulence when flying or being stuck in a tube tunnel between stations.

A child growing up with a parent who has claustrophobia may develop claustrophobia themselves by associating confined spaces with their parent's anxiety and feeling helpless to comfort the person they loved.

**Treating claustrophobia**

Many people live with claustrophobia without having it formally diagnosed and take great care to avoid confined spaces.

But getting help from a GP or a specialist with expertise in behavioural therapy, such as a psychologist, can often be beneficial.

Treatments are available for claustrophobia and can include:

* talking treatments, including [cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/cognitive-behavioural-therapy-cbt/) and exposure therapy
* self-help - find out more about [phobias and self-care on the Mind website](https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/phobias/self-care/)
* medicines, such as antidepressants or tranquilisers

CBT is a talking therapy that explores your thoughts, feelings and behaviour, and develops practical ways of effectively dealing with your phobia.

You can get free talking therapies, including CBT, on the NHS.

You do not need a referral from your GP.

You can refer yourself directly to a talking therapies service.

[Find an NHS talking therapies service in your area](https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health/find-a-psychological-therapies-service/)

If you prefer, talk to a GP and they can refer you.

Exposure therapy is a type of CBT that gradually exposes you to the situation that causes your fear. It's sometimes also known as desensitisation therapy. You can do it by yourself or with the help of a professional.

[Find out more about CBT and exposure therapy](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/cognitive-behavioural-therapy-cbt/how-it-works/).

**Coping with a panic attack**

If possible, stay where you are during a panic attack. It could last up to an hour, so if you're driving, you may need to pull over and park where it's safe to do so. Do not rush to a place of safety.

During the attack, remind yourself that the frightening thoughts and sensations are a sign of panic and will eventually pass.

Focus on something non-threatening and visible, such as the time passing on your watch or items in a supermarket.

The symptoms of a panic attack usually peak within 10 minutes, with most attacks lasting between 5 and 30 minutes.

[Get more advice on coping with a panic attack](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/panic-disorder/)

**Help and support**

Charities, such as [Anxiety UK](https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/) and [Anxiety Care UK](https://anxietycare.org.uk/), are useful sources of information and advice about how to effectively manage anxiety and phobias.

They can also put you in touch with other people who have had similar experiences.

Anxiety UK runs a helpline on 03444 775774 that's open Monday to Friday from 9.30am to 5.30pm. Calls are charged at the local rate.

You can contact Anxiety Care UK by email at [support@anxietycare.org.uk](mailto:support@anxietycare.org.uk) for advice and support.

[Claustrophobia - NHS](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/claustrophobia/)

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