**Phobias**

A phobia is an overwhelming and debilitating fear of an object, place, situation, feeling or animal.

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# Overview - Phobias

**A phobia is an overwhelming and debilitating fear of an object, place, situation, feeling or animal.**

Phobias are more pronounced than fears. They develop when a person has an exaggerated or unrealistic sense of danger about a situation or object.

If a phobia becomes very severe, a person may organise their life around avoiding the thing that's causing them anxiety. As well as restricting their day-to-day life, it can also cause a lot of distress.

## Phobia symptoms

A phobia is a type of [anxiety disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/generalised-anxiety-disorder/overview/). You may not experience any symptoms until you come into contact with the source of your phobia.

But in some cases, even thinking about the source of a phobia can make a person feel anxious or panicky. This is known as anticipatory anxiety.

Symptoms may include:

* unsteadiness, dizziness and light-headedness
* nausea
* sweating
* increased heart rate or [palpitations](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/heart-palpitations/)
* shortness of breath
* trembling or shaking
* an upset stomach

If you do not come into contact with the source of your phobia very often, it may not affect your everyday life.

But if you have a complex phobia, such as [agoraphobia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/agoraphobia/overview/), leading a normal life may be very difficult.

## Types of phobia

There are a wide variety of objects or situations that someone could develop a phobia about.

But phobias can be divided into 2 main categories:

* specific or simple phobias
* complex phobias

### **Specific or simple phobias**

Specific or simple phobias centre around a particular object, animal, situation or activity.

They often develop during childhood or adolescence and may become less severe as you get older.

Common examples of simple phobias include:

* animal phobias – such as dogs, spiders, snakes or rodents
* environmental phobias – such as heights, deep water and germs
* situational phobias – such as visiting the dentist or flying
* bodily phobias – such as blood, vomit or having injections
* sexual phobias – such as performance anxiety or the fear of getting a [sexually transmitted infection (STI)](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/sexually-transmitted-infections-stis/)

### **Complex phobias**

Complex phobias tend to be more disabling than simple phobias. They usually develop during adulthood and are often associated with a deep-rooted fear or anxiety about a particular situation or circumstance.

The 2 most common complex phobias are:

* [agoraphobia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/agoraphobia/overview/)
* [social phobia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/social-anxiety/)

Agoraphobia is often thought of as a fear of open spaces, but it's much more complex than this.

Someone with agoraphobia will feel anxious about being in a place or situation where escaping may be difficult if they have a panic attack.

The anxiety usually results in the person avoiding situations such as:

* being alone
* being in crowded places, such as busy restaurants or supermarkets
* travelling on public transport

Social phobia, also known as social anxiety disorder, centres around feeling anxious in social situations.

If you have a social phobia, you might be afraid of speaking in front of people for fear of embarrassing yourself and being humiliated in public.

In severe cases, this can become debilitating and may prevent you carrying out everyday activities, such as eating out or meeting friends.

## What causes phobias?

Phobias do not seem to have a single cause, but there are a number of associated factors.

For example:

* a phobia may be associated with a particular incident or trauma
* a phobia may be a learned response that a person develops early in life from a parent or sibling (brother or sister)
* genetics may play a role – there's evidence to suggest that some people are born with a tendency to be more anxious than others

## Diagnosing phobias

Phobias are not always formally diagnosed. Most people with a phobia are fully aware of the problem.

A person will sometimes choose to live with a phobia, taking great care to avoid the object or situation they're afraid of.

But if you have a phobia, continually trying to avoid what you're afraid of could make the situation worse.

Ask a GP for help if you have a phobia. They may refer you to a specialist with expertise in behavioural therapy, such as a psychologist.

You can refer yourself directly to an NHS talking therapies service without a referral from a GP.

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

## Treating phobias

Most phobias can be treated successfully.

Simple phobias can be treated through gradual exposure to the object, animal, place or situation that causes fear and anxiety. This is known as desensitisation or self-exposure therapy.

You could try these methods with the help of a professional or as part of a [self-help programme](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/self-help/).

Treating complex phobias often takes longer and involves talking therapies, such as:

* [counselling](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/counselling/)
* [psychotherapy](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/psychotherapy/)
* [cognitive behavioural therapy](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/cognitive-behavioural-therapy-cbt/overview/)

Medication may be prescribed to help with anxiety caused by certain phobias.

Medicines that may be used include:

* [antidepressants](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/medicines-and-psychiatry/antidepressants/overview/)
* tranquillisers
* [beta blockers](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/beta-blockers/)

## How common are phobias?

Phobias are a common type of [anxiety disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/generalised-anxiety-disorder/overview/).

They can affect anyone, regardless of age, sex and social background.

Some of the most common phobias include:

* arachnophobia – fear of spiders
* claustrophobia – fear of confined spaces
* agoraphobia – fear of open spaces and public places
* social phobia – fear of social situations

[Overview - Phobias](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/overview/)

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/overview/>

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**Symptoms - Phobias**

**Phobias can limit your daily activities and may cause severe anxiety and depression. Complex phobias, such as agoraphobia and social phobia, are more likely to cause these symptoms.**

People with phobias often purposely avoid coming into contact with the thing that causes them fear and [anxiety](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/generalised-anxiety-disorder/overview/). For example, someone with a fear of spiders (arachnophobia) may not want to touch a spider or even look at a picture of one.

In some cases, a person can develop a phobia where they become fearful of experiencing anxiety itself because it feels so uncomfortable.

You don't have to be in the situation you're fearful of to experience the [symptoms of panic](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/panic-disorder/). The brain is able to create a reaction to fearsome situations even when you aren't actually in the situation.

**Physical symptoms**

People with phobias can have [panic attacks](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/panic-disorder/). These can be very frightening and distressing. The symptoms often occur suddenly and without warning.

As well as overwhelming feelings of anxiety, a panic attack can cause physical symptoms, such as:

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

**Psychological symptoms**

In severe cases, you may also experience psychological symptoms, such as:

* fear of losing control
* fear of [fainting](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/fainting/)
* feelings of dread
* fear of dying

**Complex phobias**

Complex phobias such as [agoraphobia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/agoraphobia/overview/) and [social phobia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/social-anxiety/) can often have a detrimental effect on a person's everyday life and mental wellbeing.

Agoraphobia often involves a combination of several interlinked phobias. For example, someone with a fear of going outside or leaving their home may also have a fear of being left alone (monophobia) or of places where they feel trapped (claustrophobia).

The symptoms experienced by people with agoraphobia can vary in severity. For example, some people can feel very apprehensive and anxious if they have to leave their home to go to the shops. Others may feel relatively comfortable travelling short distances from their home.

If you have a social phobia, the thought of being seen in public or at social events can make you feel frightened, anxious and vulnerable.

Intentionally avoiding meeting people in social situations is a sign of social phobia. In extreme cases of social phobia, as with agoraphobia, some people are too afraid to leave their home.

Several [treatments for phobias](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/treatment/) are available, including talking therapies and [self-help techniques](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/self-help/). However, it can often take some time to overcome a complex phobia.

[Symptoms - Phobias](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/symptoms/)

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/>

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**Causes - Phobias**

**A phobia can develop during childhood, adolescence or early adulthood.**

They can be linked to a frightening event or stressful situation. However, it's not always clear why some phobias occur.

**Specific or simple phobias**

Specific or simple phobias, such as a fear of heights (acrophobia), usually develop during childhood.

Simple phobias can be linked to an early negative childhood experience. For example, if you're trapped in a confined space when you're young, you may develop a fear of enclosed spaces (claustrophobia) when you're older.

It's also thought that phobias can sometimes be "learnt" from an early age. For example, if someone in your family has a fear of spiders (arachnophobia), you may also develop the same fear yourself.

Other factors in the family environment, such as having parents who are particularly anxious, may also affect the way you deal with anxiety later in life.

**Complex phobias**

It's not known what causes complex phobias, such as [agoraphobia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/agoraphobia/overview/) and [social phobia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/social-anxiety/). However, it's thought that [genetics](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/genetics/), brain chemistry and life experiences may all play a part in these type of phobias.

The physical reactions (symptoms) a person experiences when faced with the object of their fear are real and aren't simply "in their head".

The body reacts to the threat by releasing the hormone adrenaline, which causes symptoms such as:

* sweating
* trembling
* shortness of breath
* a rapid heartbeat (tachycardia)

[Causes - Phobias](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/causes/)

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/>

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# Treatment - Phobias

**Many people with a phobia don't need treatment and avoiding the object of their fear is enough to control the problem.**

However, it may not always be possible to avoid certain phobias, such as a fear of flying. In this instance, you may decide to get professional help and advice to find out about treatment options.

Most phobias are treatable, but no single treatment is guaranteed to work for all phobias. In some cases, a combination of different treatments may be recommended.

The main treatment types are:

* [self-help techniques](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/self-help/)
* talking treatments
* medication

You can refer yourself directly to an NHS talking therapies service without a referral from a GP.

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

## Talking treatments

Talking treatments, such as [counselling](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/counselling/), are often very effective at treating phobias. In particular, [cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/cognitive-behavioural-therapy-cbt/overview/) has been found to be very effective for treating phobias.

### **Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)**

CBT is a type of counselling that can help you manage your problems by changing the way you think and behave. It can be used to develop practical ways of dealing with your phobia.

One part of the CBT treatment process that's often used to treat simple phobias involves gradual exposure to your fear, so you feel less anxious about it. This is known as desensitisation or exposure therapy.

For example, if you have a fear of snakes (ophidiophobia), your therapist may start by asking you to read about snakes. They may later show you a picture of a snake. They may then arrange for you to visit the reptile house of your local zoo to look at some real snakes. The final step would be for you to hold a snake.

Exposure therapy works by gradually increasing the level of exposure to your fear, which allows you to gain control over your phobia. As the treatment progresses, you should begin to feel less anxious about your phobia.

The [National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg159/chapter/1-Recommendations#specific-phobias) doesn't recommend the use of computerised CBT to treat specific phobias in adults.

## Medication

Medication isn't usually recommended for treating phobias, because talking therapies are usually effective and don't have any side effects. However, medication may sometimes be prescribed to treat the effects of phobias, such as [anxiety](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/generalised-anxiety-disorder/overview/).

There are different types of medication that may be prescribed.

### **Antidepressants**

Antidepressants are often prescribed to help reduce anxiety. [Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/medicines-and-psychiatry/ssri-antidepressants/overview/) are most often prescribed to treat anxiety, [social phobia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/social-anxiety/) or [panic disorder](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/panic-disorder/). These can include:

* [escitalopram](https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/escitalopram/) (Cipralex)
* [sertraline](https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/sertraline/) (Lustral)
* [paroxetine](https://www.nhs.uk/medicines/paroxetine/) (Seroxat)

Venlafaxine (Efexor), a serotonin and noradrenaline reuptake inhibitor (SNRI) may also be prescribed for anxiety.

Common side effects of these treatments include:

* nausea
* [headaches](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/headaches/)
* [sleep problems (insomnia)](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/insomnia/)
* upset stomach

They may also, initially, make your anxiety worse and can cause sexual problems.

Clomipramine (Anafranil) is a type of tricyclic antidepressant (TCA) that's licensed to treat some phobias. Side effects include:

* dry mouth
* drowsiness
* blurred vision
* tremors (shaking)
* [heart palpitations](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/heart-palpitations/)
* [constipation](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/constipation/)
* difficulty urinating

Moclobemide (Manerix) is a type of antidepressant from the monoamine oxidase inhibitor (MAOI) group of antidepressants. It's sometimes prescribed to treat social phobia.

Moclobemide interacts with certain types of food, so if you're prescribed this medication, read the information leaflet that comes with it to find out which foods to avoid.

Other possible side effects of moclobemide include:

* sleep problems
* dizziness
* stomach problems
* headaches
* restlessness

If you're prescribed antidepressants, it's very important that you don't suddenly stop taking them. Suddenly stopping can cause withdrawal symptoms. See your GP, who can gradually lower your dose.

### **Tranquillisers**

Benzodiazepines are a group of medicines that are categorised as minor tranquillisers. They include medicines such as diazepam (Valium) and are sometimes used on a short-term basis at the lowest possible dose to treat severe anxiety.

Like antidepressants, benzodiazepines should be stopped gradually to avoid withdrawal symptoms.

### **Beta blockers**

[Beta blockers](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/beta-blockers/) are often used to treat cardiovascular conditions, such as heart problems and [high blood pressure (hypertension)](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/high-blood-pressure-hypertension/). They are also sometimes prescribed to help reduce the symptoms of anxiety, such as [heart palpitations](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/heart-palpitations/).

Beta blockers slow down your heart rate and decrease your blood pressure. Propranolol (Inderal) is a beta blocker that's commonly used to treat anxiety.

Possible side effects include:

* stomach problems
* cold fingers
* tiredness
* sleep problems

[Treatment - Phobias](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/treatment/)

<https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/>

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**Self-help – Phobias**

**Each phobia is different and no single self-help programme will work for everyone. You may decide to use your own self-help strategy or get help from a mental health specialist, such as a psychologist.**

A self-help programme could include:

* lifestyle changes
* a course of [cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/cognitive-behavioural-therapy-cbt/overview/)
* attending a self-help group
* using exposure therapy to overcome your fear
* a combination of these

**Lifestyle changes**

Making some simple changes to your lifestyle may help reduce the [symptoms of a phobia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/symptoms/), such as [panic attacks](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/panic-disorder/).

This could include:

* [regular exercise](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/exercise-guidelines/)
* eating regular, healthy meals
* getting enough [sleep](https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/)
* reducing or avoiding caffeine and other stimulants

**Exposure therapy (desensitisation)**

Exposure therapy involves gradually increasing the length of time you're exposed to your phobia.

For example, if you have [agoraphobia](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/agoraphobia/overview/), a fear of open spaces and public places, you might start by going outside your house for a very short period of time, before gradually increasing the length of time you spend outside and the distance you travel from your house.

Exposure therapy can be a very effective way of enabling you to cope with your [anxiety](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/generalised-anxiety-disorder/overview/).

**Other self-help techniques**

Other self-help techniques include:

* relaxation techniques – a series of physical exercises that help you relax and control your breathing
* visualisation – combines relaxation and breathing techniques with mentally visualising how you'll successfully deal with a situation that could cause anxiety
* self-help groups – a useful way of meeting others with similar experiences and sharing ways of coping

Read more about [relaxation tips to relieve stress](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/breathing-exercises-for-stress/) and [dealing with panic attacks](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/panic-disorder/).

[Self-help - Phobias](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/phobias/self-help/)

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**Related information**

* [Self-help tips and support](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/)
* [Anxiety, fear and panic](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/feelings-symptoms-behaviours/feelings-and-symptoms/anxiety-fear-panic/)
* [NHS talking therapies](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/nhs-talking-therapies/)

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

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