

Understanding Generalized Anxiety Disorder in Children and Teens

Generalized anxiety disorder, or GAD, is a mental health condition. A child or teen with GAD feels very worried or nervous most of the time. These feelings are strong and happen often, even when there is no clear reason. Children and teens with GAD may not realize their worry is stronger than it needs to be. They are not doing it on purpose.

Children and teens with GAD may:

- Worry about school, family, or the future
- Ask the same questions often and need lots of reassurance
- Feel restless or tired a lot
- Avoid going to school or doing things they used to enjoy

These worries can affect how a child thinks, feels, and acts. They can also affect sleep, school, and friendships.

It is normal to be concerned about your child when they are struggling. You are not alone, and your concern shows how much you care. The good news is that GAD can be treated. With the right support from the care team, school, and family, most children and teens start to feel better and enjoy life more. Reaching out is the first step toward healing.



Causes of Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Experts do not know the exact cause of GAD, but it may be due to:

- **Family history:** A child is more likely to have GAD if a parent, brother, or sister has anxiety or depression.
- **Brain chemicals:** An imbalance in norepinephrine and serotonin, which help with mood, may play a role.
- **Learned behavior:** Children can learn to worry by watching others who are often anxious.
- **Stressful events:** Loss, illness, or family changes like divorce can cause or increase anxiety.

Risk Factors

Children and teens are more likely to have GAD if they:

- Have a parent with anxiety or depression
- Were shy or cautious as toddlers
- Have experienced trauma or a major life change
- Have another condition like ADHD or depression

Common Signs and Symptoms

Children and teens may show anxiety in different ways than adults.

Watch for these signs:

- Worrying about many things before they happen
- Worrying a lot about school, friends, or activities
- Asking about safety often, for themselves or their family
- Refusing to go to school or sleep away from home
- Headaches, stomachaches, or feeling sick often
- Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
- Muscle tension or feeling like there is a lump in the throat
- Clingy behavior with parents or caregivers
- Fatigue, irritability, or trouble concentrating
- Getting startled easily or seeming always on edge
- Trouble relaxing or playing
- Needing constant reassurance

Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

If, at any time, your child tells you that they have thoughts of self-harm or suicide, please talk to someone right away. The 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline offers free, 24/7 call and text access to trained crisis counselors who can help anyone in emotional distress, and caregivers too. Just call or text 988.

Testing and Diagnosis

A mental health expert can evaluate your child for GAD. Before this, your care team may try to rule out other health problems.

The mental health evaluation may include:

- Questions about your child's emotions, behavior, and social life
- Interviews with your child and a parent or caregiver
- Standardized tests or checklists

Possible Complications

If GAD is not treated, it may cause:

- Problems with school or friendships
- Low self-esteem
- Depression or other mental health concerns
- Sleep problems or physical illness

Treatment

Treatment for GAD may include:

- **Cognitive behavioral therapy:** This helps a child learn how to better manage anxiety. The goal is also to help a child master the situations that may lead to anxiety.
- **Medicines:** Antidepressant or anti-anxiety medicine may help some children feel calmer.
- **Family therapy:** Parents play a vital role in any treatment.
- **School input:** A child's school may also be included in care.

Treatment will depend on your child's symptoms, age, and general health. It will also depend on the severity of the condition.

How to Support Your Child

You may not be able to prevent GAD, but you can help your child by:

- Talking openly and listening without judgment
- Keeping regular routines for meals, sleep, and school
- Helping them practice calming habits like breathing or drawing
- Working closely with your child's school
- Giving praise for effort, not just results



Questions for Your Care Team

You can ask your care team:

- What signs should I watch for in my child?
- What treatments work best for this age group?
- Will my child need therapy, medicine, or both?
- How long will treatment take?
- How can we support our child at home and at school?

When to Contact Your Care Team

Call your care team if your child or teen:

- Has constant worry or fear that does not go away and lasts for weeks or months
- Has trouble sleeping that is not getting better, such as being unable to fall asleep, waking up a lot, or having nightmares
- Has physical complaints like headaches, stomachaches, or feeling sick, and the care team cannot find a cause
- Avoids friends, school, or activities they used to enjoy
- Is irritable or has mood changes, being more angry, sad, or upset than usual
- Has trouble concentrating or paying attention in school or at home
- Seeks frequent reassurance, asking “Am I OK?” or “Is something bad going to happen?” over and over
- Has changes in appetite, like eating much more or less than usual
- Has persistent fatigue or low energy that does not improve with rest

You can call your care team if you have any questions or concerns about your child’s mental health or behavior.

When to Call 911 or Go to the Emergency Room

Get help right away if your child or teen:

- Has thoughts or talk of self-harm or suicide, saying they want to hurt themselves or end their life
- Talks about hurting others or acts in a way that could be dangerous to themselves or others
- Has severe panic attacks that cause trouble breathing, chest pain, or feeling like they are losing control, and do not get better with calming strategies
- Has sudden confusion, trouble speaking, or acting very differently, as in not making sense or seeing or hearing things that are not there
- Cannot be woken up, or is very hard to wake up



- Has severe agitation or aggression, such as destroying property, threatening others, or being unable to calm down

If you are ever unsure, it is always OK to call your care team or seek emergency help. Your child's safety is the most important thing.

Thank You for Choosing Us

Thank you for trusting us with your child's care. We are here to support you and want you and your child to feel your best. Contact us with any questions.

IF YOU HAVE A MEDICAL EMERGENCY, CALL 911 OR GO TO THE EMERGENCY ROOM.

The information presented is intended for general information and educational purposes. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care provider. Contact your health care provider if you believe you have a health problem.

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