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[Home](#) | [Help for Mental Illnesses](#)

[Información en español](#)

MENTAL HEALTH INFORMATION

GET INVOLVED

RESEARCH

FUNDING

NEWS & EVENTS

ABOUT US

Health Topics

Statistics

Brochures and Fact Sheets

Help for Mental Illnesses

Clinical Trials

Home > Mental Health Information > Brochures and Fact Sheets > Phobias and Phobia-Related Disorders

What is a phobia?

What causes phobia-related disorders?

How are phobia-related disorders treated?

How can I find help?

Where can I learn more about phobia-related disorders?

What are clinical trials, and why are they important?

For more information

Reprints

Phobias and Phobia-Related Disorders

What is a phobia?

A phobia is an intense fear of—or aversion to—a specific object or situation. While anxiety is natural under some circumstances, people with phobias feel fear that is out of proportion to the actual danger presented by the situation or object.

People with a phobia may:

- Have an irrational or excessive worry about encountering the feared object or situation
- Take active steps to avoid the feared object or situation
- Experience immediate, intense anxiety upon encountering the feared object or situation
- Endure unavoidable objects and situations with intense anxiety

There are several types of phobias and phobia-related disorders:

Specific phobias (sometimes called **simple phobias**): As the name suggests, people who have a specific phobia have an intense fear of, or feel intense anxiety about, specific types of objects or situations. Some common examples of specific phobias include the fear of flying, fear of heights, fear of specific animals (such as spiders, dogs, or snakes), fear of receiving injections, and fear of blood.

Agoraphobia: People with agoraphobia have an intense fear of two or more of the following situations:

- Using public transportation
- Being in open spaces
- Being in enclosed spaces
- Standing in line or being in a crowd
- Being outside of the home alone

People with agoraphobia often avoid these situations because they think being able to leave might be difficult or impossible in the event they have panic-like reactions or other embarrassing symptoms. In the most severe form of agoraphobia, an individual can become housebound.

Social anxiety disorder (previously called **social phobia**) is an intense, persistent fear of being watched and judged by others. To learn more, visit [NIMH's page on social anxiety disorder](#).

What causes phobia-related disorders?

Research shows that genetic and environmental factors play a role in developing a specific phobia. Some risk factors include:

- Exposure to a traumatic event involving a specific object or situation
- Feeling distressed or nervous in new situations in childhood
- A history of anxiety or other mental disorders in biological relatives

How are phobia-related disorders treated?

Psychotherapy is the primary treatment approach for phobias. Medications may help treat phobia symptoms in specific circumstances.

Psychotherapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a well-established and effective treatment for anxiety disorders such as phobias. It teaches different ways of thinking, behaving, and reacting to situations to help reduce anxiety and fear.

Exposure therapy is a CBT method that is particularly effective for treating phobias. Exposure therapy focuses on confronting the fears underlying a phobia to help people engage in activities and situations they have been avoiding. Exposure therapy may be paired with relaxation exercises.

Acceptance and commitment therapy

Another treatment option for some anxiety disorders, including phobias, is acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). ACT uses strategies like mindfulness and goal setting to reduce discomfort and anxiety. Compared to CBT, ACT is a newer type of psychotherapy treatment, so less data are available on its effectiveness.



A health care provider may prescribe medications like [anti-anxiety medications and beta-blockers](#) to relieve phobia symptoms in specific situations. The provider can evaluate your symptoms and needs and help you decide whether to include medications in your treatment plan.

Support groups

Some people may benefit from including a support group in their treatment plan. Support groups can provide a welcoming space in person or online for people to discuss their concerns, share their experiences, and learn from others.

Stress management techniques

Practicing stress management techniques like exercise, mindfulness, and meditation also can help reduce phobia-related anxiety and help make psychotherapy even more effective.

How can I find help?

If you have concerns about your mental health, talk to a primary care provider. They can refer you to a qualified mental health professional, such as a psychologist, psychiatrist, or clinical social worker, who can help you figure out the next steps. Find [tips for talking with a health care provider](#) about your mental health.

You can [learn more about getting help](#) on the NIMH website. You can also learn about [finding support](#) and [locating mental health services](#) in your area on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) website.

Where can I learn more about phobia-related disorders?

- [Phobias](#) (MedlinePlus)

What are clinical trials, and why are they important?

Clinical trials are research studies that look at ways to prevent, detect, or treat diseases and conditions, including phobias and phobia-related disorders. These studies help show whether a treatment is safe and effective in people. Some people join clinical trials to help doctors and researchers learn more about a disease and improve health care. Other people, such as those with health conditions, join to try treatments that aren't widely available.

NIMH supports clinical trials across the United States. Talk to a health care provider about clinical trials and whether one is right for you. Learn more about [participating in clinical trials](#).

For more information

Learn more about [mental health disorders and topics](#). For information about various health topics, visit the [National Library of Medicine's MedlinePlus](#) resource.

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