



Patient education: Generalized anxiety disorder (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

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How do you know when anxiety is a medical problem?

Everyone feels anxious or nervous once in a while. That is normal. But being extremely anxious or worried on most days for 6 months or longer is not normal. This is called "generalized anxiety disorder." The disorder can make it hard to do everyday tasks.

Generalized anxiety disorder is just 1 anxiety disorder. There are others, such as panic disorder and phobias. This article focuses on generalized anxiety disorder.

What are the symptoms of extreme or severe anxiety?

People with extreme or severe anxiety feel very worried or "on edge" much of the time. They can have trouble sleeping or forget things. Plus, they can have physical symptoms. For instance, people with severe anxiety often feel very tired and have tense muscles. Some get stomach aches or feel chest "tightness."

Should I see a doctor or nurse?

See your doctor or nurse if you:

- Are more anxious than you think is normal
- Get very anxious about things that other people handle more easily

Your doctor or nurse can ask you questions that are designed to "measure" a person's anxiety level. If you do have a problem with anxiety, there are different treatments that can help.

Is there anything I can do on my own to feel better?

Yes. It might help to:

- **Move your body** – Exercise can help many people feel less anxious. Even gentle forms of exercise, like walking, are good for your health.
- **Limit or avoid caffeine** – Cut down on or stop drinking coffee and other sources of caffeine. Caffeine can make anxiety worse.
- **Find healthy ways to manage stress** – Some people find that it helps to try something called "mindfulness-based stress reduction." This involves going to a group program to practice relaxation and meditation. Other people find that activities like yoga, tai chi, or meditation help them manage their anxiety.
- **Eat a healthy diet** – Eating plenty of vegetables, fruits, and whole grains can help with your overall health. Try to limit or avoid alcohol.

How is anxiety treated?

Treatments include:

- **Psychotherapy** – Psychotherapy involves meeting with a mental health counselor to talk about your feelings, relationships, and worries. Therapy can help you find new ways of thinking about your situation so that you feel less anxious. In therapy, you might also learn new skills to reduce anxiety.
- **Medicines** – Medicines used to treat depression can relieve anxiety, too, even in people who are not depressed. Your doctor or nurse will decide which medicines are best for your situation.

Some people have psychotherapy and take medicines at the same time.

There is no reason to feel embarrassed about getting treatment for anxiety. Anxiety is a common problem. It affects all kinds of people.

Remember that it might take a little while to find the right treatment. People respond in different ways to medicines and therapy, so you might need to try a few approaches before you find the one that helps you most. The key is to not give up and to let your doctor or nurse know how you feel along the way.

Are there herbal treatments I can take?

Makers of herbal drugs sometimes claim that their products relieve anxiety. For example, herbs called kava kava and valerian are sold as treatments for anxiety. But there is no evidence that these treatments work. Plus, kava kava has been linked with serious liver damage. It might not be safe.

What if I want to get pregnant?

If you take medicines to treat anxiety, speak to your doctor before you start trying to get pregnant. Some of the medicines used to treat anxiety can cause problems for a developing baby. Because of this, you might need to switch medicines before you get pregnant.

What will my life be like?

People with anxiety disorders often have to deal with some anxiety for the rest of their life. For some, anxiety comes and goes, but gets worse during times of stress. The good news is, many people find effective treatments or ways to deal with their anxiety.

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