

Anxiety disorders

Overview

Experiencing occasional anxiety is a normal part of life. However, people with anxiety disorders frequently have intense, excessive and persistent worry and fear about everyday situations. Often, anxiety disorders involve repeated episodes of sudden feelings of intense anxiety and fear or terror that reach a peak within minutes (panic attacks).

These feelings of anxiety and panic interfere with daily activities, are difficult to control, are out of proportion to the actual danger and can last a long time. You may avoid places or situations to prevent these feelings. Symptoms may start during childhood or the teen years and continue into adulthood.

Examples of anxiety disorders include generalized anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder (social phobia), specific phobias and separation anxiety disorder. You can have more than one anxiety disorder. Sometimes anxiety results from a medical condition that needs treatment.

Whatever form of anxiety you have, treatment can help.

Symptoms

Common anxiety signs and symptoms include:

- Feeling nervous, restless or tense
- Having a sense of impending danger, panic or doom
- Having an increased heart rate
- Breathing rapidly (hyperventilation)
- Sweating
- Trembling
- Feeling weak or tired
- Trouble concentrating or thinking about anything other than the present worry
- Having trouble sleeping
- Experiencing gastrointestinal (GI) problems
- Having difficulty controlling worry
- Having the urge to avoid things that trigger anxiety

Several types of anxiety disorders exist:

- **Agoraphobia** (ag-uh-ruh-FOE-be-uh) is a type of anxiety disorder in which you fear and often avoid places or situations that might cause you to panic and make you feel trapped, helpless or embarrassed.
- **Anxiety disorder due to a medical condition** includes symptoms of intense anxiety or panic that are directly caused by a physical health problem.
- **Generalized anxiety disorder** includes persistent and excessive anxiety and worry about activities or events — even ordinary, routine issues. The worry is out of proportion to the actual circumstance, is difficult to control and affects how you feel physically. It often occurs along with other anxiety disorders or depression.
- **Panic disorder** involves repeated episodes of sudden feelings of intense anxiety and fear or terror that reach a peak within minutes (panic attacks). You may have feelings of impending doom, shortness of breath, chest pain, or a rapid, fluttering or pounding heart (heart palpitations). These panic attacks may lead to worrying about them happening again or avoiding situations in which they've occurred.
- **Selective mutism** is a consistent failure of children to speak in certain situations, such as school, even when they can speak in other situations, such as at home with close family members. This can interfere with school, work and social functioning.
- **Separation anxiety disorder** is a childhood disorder characterized by anxiety that's excessive for the child's developmental level and related to separation from parents or others who have parental roles.
- **Social anxiety disorder (social phobia)** involves high levels of anxiety, fear and avoidance of social situations due to feelings of embarrassment, self-consciousness and concern about being judged or viewed negatively by others.
- **Specific phobias** are characterized by major anxiety when you're exposed to a specific object or situation and a desire to avoid it. Phobias provoke panic attacks in some people.
- **Substance-induced anxiety disorder** is characterized by symptoms of intense anxiety or panic that are a direct result of misusing drugs, taking medications, being exposed to a toxic substance or withdrawal from drugs.
- **Other specified anxiety disorder and unspecified anxiety disorder** are terms for anxiety or phobias that don't meet the exact criteria for any other anxiety disorders but are significant enough to be distressing and disruptive.

When to see a doctor

See your doctor if:

- You feel like you're worrying too much and it's interfering with your work, relationships or other parts of your life
- Your fear, worry or anxiety is upsetting to you and difficult to control
- You feel depressed, have trouble with alcohol or drug use, or have other mental health concerns along with anxiety
- You think your anxiety could be linked to a physical health problem
- You have suicidal thoughts or behaviors — if this is the case, seek emergency treatment immediately

Your worries may not go away on their own, and they may get worse over time if you don't seek help. See your doctor or a mental health provider before your anxiety gets worse. It's easier to treat if you get help early.

Causes

The causes of anxiety disorders aren't fully understood. Life experiences such as traumatic events appear to trigger anxiety disorders in people who are already prone to anxiety. Inherited traits also can be a factor.

Medical causes

For some people, anxiety may be linked to an underlying health issue. In some cases, anxiety signs and symptoms are the first indicators of a medical illness. If your doctor suspects your anxiety may have a medical cause, he or she may order tests to look for signs of a problem.

Examples of medical problems that can be linked to anxiety include:

- Heart disease
- Diabetes
- Thyroid problems, such as hyperthyroidism
- Respiratory disorders, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and asthma
- Drug misuse or withdrawal
- Withdrawal from alcohol, anti-anxiety medications (benzodiazepines) or other medications
- Chronic pain or irritable bowel syndrome
- Rare tumors that produce certain fight-or-flight hormones

Sometimes anxiety can be a side effect of certain medications.

It's possible that your anxiety may be due to an underlying medical condition if:

- You don't have any blood relatives (such as a parent or sibling) with an anxiety disorder
- You didn't have an anxiety disorder as a child
- You don't avoid certain things or situations because of anxiety
- You have a sudden occurrence of anxiety that seems unrelated to life events and you didn't have a previous history of anxiety

Risk factors

These factors may increase your risk of developing an anxiety disorder:

- **Trauma.** Children who endured abuse or trauma or witnessed traumatic events are at higher risk of developing an anxiety disorder at some point in life. Adults who experience a traumatic event also can develop anxiety disorders.
- **Stress due to an illness.** Having a health condition or serious illness can cause significant worry about issues such as your treatment and your future.
- **Stress buildup.** A big event or a buildup of smaller stressful life situations may trigger excessive anxiety — for example, a death in the family, work stress or ongoing worry about finances.
- **Personality.** People with certain personality types are more prone to anxiety disorders than others are.
- **Other mental health disorders.** People with other mental health disorders, such as depression, often also have an anxiety disorder.
- **Having blood relatives with an anxiety disorder.** Anxiety disorders can run in families.
- **Drugs or alcohol.** Drug or alcohol use or misuse or withdrawal can cause or worsen anxiety.

Complications

Having an anxiety disorder does more than make you worry. It can also lead to, or worsen, other mental and physical conditions, such as:

- Depression (which often occurs with an anxiety disorder) or other mental health disorders
- Substance misuse
- Trouble sleeping (insomnia)

- Digestive or bowel problems
- Headaches and chronic pain
- Social isolation
- Problems functioning at school or work
- Poor quality of life
- Suicide

Prevention

There's no way to predict for certain what will cause someone to develop an anxiety disorder, but you can take steps to reduce the impact of symptoms if you're anxious:

- **Get help early.** Anxiety, like many other mental health conditions, can be harder to treat if you wait.
- **Stay active.** Participate in activities that you enjoy and that make you feel good about yourself. Enjoy social interaction and caring relationships, which can lessen your worries.
- **Avoid alcohol or drug use.** Alcohol and drug use can cause or worsen anxiety. If you're addicted to any of these substances, quitting can make you anxious. If you can't quit on your own, see your doctor or find a support group to help you.

Diagnosis

You may start by seeing your primary care provider to find out if your anxiety could be related to your physical health. He or she can check for signs of an underlying medical condition that may need treatment.

However, you may need to see a mental health specialist if you have severe anxiety. A psychiatrist is a medical doctor who specializes in diagnosing and treating mental health conditions. A psychologist and certain other mental health professionals can diagnose anxiety and provide counseling (psychotherapy).

To help diagnose an anxiety disorder, your mental health provider may:

- **Give you a psychological evaluation.** This involves discussing your thoughts, feelings and behavior to help pinpoint a diagnosis and check for related complications. Anxiety disorders often occur along with other mental health

problems — such as depression or substance misuse — which can make diagnosis more challenging.

- **Compare your symptoms to the criteria in the DSM-5.** Many doctors use the criteria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), published by the American Psychiatric Association, to diagnose an anxiety disorder.

Treatment

The two main treatments for anxiety disorders are psychotherapy and medications. You may benefit most from a combination of the two. It may take some trial and error to discover which treatments work best for you.

Psychotherapy

Also known as talk therapy or psychological counseling, psychotherapy involves working with a therapist to reduce your anxiety symptoms. It can be an effective treatment for anxiety.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is the most effective form of psychotherapy for anxiety disorders. Generally a short-term treatment, CBT focuses on teaching you specific skills to improve your symptoms and gradually return to the activities you've avoided because of anxiety.

CBT includes exposure therapy, in which you gradually encounter the object or situation that triggers your anxiety so you build confidence that you can manage the situation and anxiety symptoms.

Lifestyle and home remedies

While most people with anxiety disorders need psychotherapy or medications to get anxiety under control, lifestyle changes also can make a difference. Here's what you can do:

- **Keep physically active.** Develop a routine so that you're physically active most days of the week. Exercise is a powerful stress reducer. It may improve your mood and help you stay healthy. Start out slowly and gradually increase the amount and intensity of your activities.
- **Avoid alcohol and recreational drugs.** These substances can cause or worsen anxiety. If you can't quit on your own, see your doctor or find a support group to help you.
- **Quit smoking and cut back or quit drinking caffeinated beverages.** Both nicotine and caffeine can worsen anxiety.

- **Use stress management and relaxation techniques.** Visualization techniques, meditation and yoga are examples of relaxation techniques that can ease anxiety.
- **Make sleep a priority.** Do what you can to make sure you're getting enough sleep to feel rested. If you aren't sleeping well, see your doctor.
- **Eat healthy.** Healthy eating — such as focusing on vegetables, fruits, whole grains and fish — may be linked to reduced anxiety, but more research is needed.

Coping and support

To cope with an anxiety disorder, here's what you can do:

- **Learn about your disorder.** Talk to your doctor or mental health provider. Find out what might be causing your specific condition and what treatments might be best for you. Involve your family and friends and ask for their support.
- **Stick to your treatment plan.** Take medications as directed. Keep therapy appointments and complete any assignments your therapist may give you. Consistency can make a big difference, especially when it comes to taking your medication.
- **Take action.** Learn what triggers your anxiety or causes you stress. Practice the strategies you developed with your mental health provider so you're ready to deal with anxious feelings in these situations.
- **Keep a journal.** Keeping track of your personal life can help you and your mental health provider identify what's causing you stress and what seems to help you feel better.
- **Join an anxiety support group.** Remember that you aren't alone. Support groups offer compassion, understanding and shared experiences. The National Alliance on Mental Illness and the Anxiety and Depression Association of America provide information on finding support.
- **Learn time management techniques.** You can reduce anxiety by learning how to carefully manage your time and energy.
- **Socialize.** Don't let worries isolate you from loved ones or activities.
- **Break the cycle.** When you feel anxious, take a brisk walk or delve into a hobby to refocus your mind away from your worries.