

Anxiety

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is feeling uneasy, tense or apprehensive in response to stressful or threatening circumstances. Some people feel more anxiety than others. Some people feel more anxiety than others. Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress. At times it may actually help you deal with tense situations. It may help you be more alert or careful. But when anxiety becomes an excessive, irrational dread of everyday situations, it is a disabling disorder. Examples of anxiety disorders are panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

How does it occur?

The exact cause of anxiety is not known. The brain is made up of billions of neurons (cells) that communicate with each other. This affects other parts of the body. Neurotransmitters are chemical substances in the brain. The kinds and amounts of these substances control how neurons communicate. Too much or too little of these neurotransmitters may lead to anxiety. Anxiety problems tend to run in families. Stressful life events and situations also play a major part. Anxiety is more common if you have few friends, family, and activities. Poor diet and lack of daily exercise may also make anxiety disorders more likely. Sometimes you may feel tense or anxious but it is not tied to anything specific. Anxiety may come from seeing yourself as helpless and feeling unable to cope. Anxiety sometimes starts with a difficult or painful experience. In older people, it might start with:

- loss of status, relationships and routine following retirement
- ill health
- financial worries
- boredom.

Anxiety can be brought on by:

- alcohol
- amphetamines
- cocaine
- caffeine
- some antidepressants
- steroids
- withdrawal from certain sedatives

Medical conditions can also cause anxiety. Heart problems, breathing problems, lack of vitamins, or blood sugar or thyroid problems can cause anxiety symptoms. For this reason, it is always important to discuss any long-term anxiety with your healthcare provider.

What are the symptoms?

The signs and symptoms of anxiety may be both psychological and physical. The symptoms can be mild, or they may be so intense that you feel panic. Psychological symptoms include:

- apprehension or fear

- feeling cranky or irritable
- panic
- impatience
- feeling of imminent danger
- feeling restless or unable to relax
- trouble concentrating
- trouble sleeping
- lack of enjoyment.

Physical signs and symptoms include:

- dry mouth or feeling like you are choking
- flushing
- nausea or vomiting
- feeling faint, lightheaded, or shaky
- diarrhea
- constipation
- muscle tension
- frequent urination
- hyperactivity
- sexual difficulties
- rapid or irregular heartbeat
- hyperventilating or feeling short of breath
- sweating, especially in the palms.

How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms. He or she will ask you about life events, daily activities, and your view of how things are going. Your healthcare provider will also examine you. Lab tests may be done to rule out a physical problem as the reason for your anxiety. Possible tests include a blood tests, thyroid function tests, and urine tests.

How is it treated?

You and your healthcare provider will discuss your symptoms. Then he or she will suggest ways to help you deal with anxiety. Your provider may refer you to a mental health professional. Cognitive behavioral therapy, relaxation therapy, biofeedback, stress management techniques, and other forms of therapy may be useful. If your anxiety is severe or causing panic, your healthcare provider may prescribe a medicine to help you cope with the symptoms. Several medicines can help treat anxiety. Your healthcare provider will work with you to carefully select the best one for you. To decrease anxiety, it is important to identify and use methods that relieve your symptoms. Your healthcare provider may want to see you regularly if your anxiety attacks include physical symptoms.

How can I take care of myself?

Take antianxiety medicines exactly as your healthcare provider prescribes. Do not take more than prescribed. Do not stop taking the medicine without your healthcare provider's approval. You may have to reduce your dosage gradually. This helps to prevent withdrawal symptoms.

- Get support. Talk with family and friends. Consider joining a support group in your area.

- Learn to manage stress. Ask for help at home and work when the load is too great to handle. Find ways to relax, for example take up a hobby, listen to music, watch movies, take walks. Try deep breathing exercises when you feel stressed.
- Take care of your physical health. Try to get at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Eat a healthy diet. Limit caffeine. If you smoke, quit. Avoid alcohol and drugs, because they can make your symptoms worse. Exercise according to your healthcare provider's instructions.
- Check your medicines. To help prevent problems, tell your healthcare provider and pharmacist about all the medicines, natural remedies, vitamins, and other supplements that you take.
- Contact your healthcare provider or therapist if you have any questions or your symptoms seem to be getting worse.

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