

# Anxiety

## What You Need to Know About Anxiety

Anxiety disorders are medical illnesses. They are chronic, relentless and can grow worse if left untreated. Anxiety disorders do not discriminate. They affect men and women, young and old, and people of all races, cultures and incomes.

Most people feel a little anxious before a big speech, a job interview or a visit to the doctor. Sweaty palms and “butterflies” in your stomach are normal reactions. Crippling fear, however, is *not* normal.

Anxiety disorders strike 19 million Americans each year – about 13 percent of the adult population (ages 18-54). Having an anxiety disorder is not a sign of moral weakness. In fact, experts believe that anxiety disorders

are caused by a combination of biological and environmental factors, much like physical disorders, such as heart disease or diabetes.

The most common anxiety disorders are panic disorders, phobias, post-traumatic stress disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorders and generalized anxiety disorders.

## Major Signs and Symptoms of an Anxiety Disorder

Although each of the five anxiety disorders described in this brochure has its own distinct features, all include some degree of excessive, irrational or ongoing anxiety or fear and feelings of dread or terror.

### SPECIFIC SYMPTOMS CAN INCLUDE:

- Sweating, trembling, nausea, and difficulty talking
- Painful, intrusive memories; recurring nightmares
- Fatigue, headaches, muscle tension, muscle aches, irritability, or difficulty swallowing
- Persistent obsessive thoughts
- Intense feelings of panic and fear

Anxiety disorders are real, serious and treatable. Dreading and/or avoiding everyday activities is not normal. With proper treatment, people with anxiety disorders can lead full and productive lives.

Anxiety disorders are highly treatable, yet only one-third of those who suffer from an anxiety disorder receive treatment.

## Types of Anxiety Disorders

The most common anxiety disorders are listed below.

- **PHOBIA.** An intense, irrational fear of a particular thing, most commonly escalators, closed-in spaces, heights, tunnels, dogs, highway driving, water, flying and blood. Phobias are often caused by panic disorder.
- **PANIC DISORDER.** Feelings of terror that strike suddenly and *repeatedly* without warning are symptoms of panic disorder. Your heart may pound; you may feel sweaty, weak, faint, dizzy, nauseous, flushed or chilled; your hands may tingle or feel numb; you may have chest pain or smothering sensations, as well as a sense of unreality or impending doom or a fear of loss of control. Attacks usually peak within 10 minutes, but symptoms may last longer and can occur at any time — even during sleep.
- **SOCIAL PHOBIA (ALSO CALLED SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER).** Involves a persistent, intense fear of being watched and judged by others and being embarrassed by one's own actions such as speaking in public or meeting new people. You may blush, sweat profusely, tremble and experience nausea and difficulty talking.
- **OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE DISORDER (OCD).** People with OCD have anxious or disturbing thoughts (called "obsessions") and/or engage in rituals or repetitive activities (called "compulsions") to avoid anxiety. You may be preoccupied by order or obsess about germs or have thoughts of performing unacceptable actions. If the recurrent thoughts or actions are distressing or interfere with getting things done, seek help.
- **GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER (GAD).** Anticipating disaster and worrying excessively about health, money, family, or work are symptoms of GAD. Other symptoms include fatigue, headaches, muscle tension, muscle aches, difficulty swallowing, trembling, twitching, irritability, sweating and hot flashes. You may also feel nauseated, have to go to the bathroom frequently and have difficulty concentrating or sleeping.

- **POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD).** PTSD is a debilitating condition that can develop after a terrifying event. You may experience persistent frightening thoughts of the ordeal, nightmares, sleep problems, feelings of detachment or numbness, and a loss of interest in things you used to enjoy. You may become irritable or even aggressive.

## Getting Help

If you think you have an anxiety disorder:

- Contact your family physician or a psychiatrist. This is strongly advised because anxiety disorders often coexist with other medical conditions, such as depression, substance use disorders and eating disorders. Only psychiatrists or other physicians can prescribe medications; psychiatrists are also specially trained to diagnose different types of anxiety disorders.

Or

- Find out if your employer has an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). EAPs can provide you with access to mental health professionals. These programs are confidential and often free or inexpensive.

## Treatment

After a specific diagnosis is made, anxiety disorders can be successfully treated with medications and/or psychotherapy ("talk" therapy). The most common medications prescribed for anxiety are antidepressants, anti-anxiety drugs and beta-blockers. The most common psychotherapies used are cognitive behavioral therapy, behavior therapy and psychodynamic psychotherapy.

Before taking medication for an anxiety disorder:

- Ask about side effects, how long it takes for the drug to work and how the medication will be stopped. *Stopping some medications suddenly can lead to a serious medical problem.*
- Tell your doctor about all prescription drugs and any alternative therapies or over-the-counter medications you are using.

**It is important that you feel comfortable with the therapy suggested. If you are not, make your concerns known and seek help elsewhere if necessary. You are a vital part of your recovery.**

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## Partnership for Workplace Mental Health

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For more information, visit [www.workplacementalhealth.org](http://www.workplacementalhealth.org).