



Anxiety Disorders

UHN

Information for patients and families

Read this booklet to learn:

- what anxiety disorders
- what causes them
- the signs and symptoms
- how they can be treated
- how to help a family member who has an anxiety disorder



What are anxiety disorders?

Anxiety is when you feel nervous or tense. You may feel like your heart is beating very quickly and you can't catch your breath. Everyone has anxiety sometimes, like during a job interview or when writing a test. This kind of anxiety is normal. It's usually mild and doesn't last a long time.

You may have an anxiety disorder if your anxiety:

- happens often or continues for a longer time
- is very bad or intense
- gets in the way of your daily life

People with anxiety disorders may find it hard to get things done, work, or spend time with others.

Who gets anxiety disorders?

Anxiety disorders are some of the most common mental disorders. More women than men experience anxiety disorders.

What causes them?

There are many different reasons why a person may have an anxiety disorder. They include:

- **a history of anxiety disorders in your family**
Anxiety disorders can run in families. If a member of your family has an anxiety disorder, you have a higher chance of also having one.
- **life stressors**
Stressful life situations like abuse, trauma, or health and relationship problems can increase your chance of having an anxiety disorder.
- **personality**
For example, being very shy or self-conscious can increase your chance of having an anxiety disorder.

- **other mental health disorders**

If you have another mental health disorder, such as depression or bipolar disorder, you have a higher chance of having an anxiety disorder.

- **physical illness**

Some illnesses can lead to anxiety including:

- thyroid problems
- heart problems
- asthma
- diabetes

- **prescription medicines**

Some kinds of prescription medicines can also cause anxiety. It's important to have your health checked regularly. Ask about the side effects of medicines you are taking.

- **drugs and alcohol**

Alcohol and some street drugs can lead to anxiety or make it worse.

What are the signs of an anxiety disorder?

All anxiety disorders share some common signs or symptoms:

- **emotional symptoms (how you feel)**

For example, you may feel more afraid than normal of common situations.

- **cognitive symptoms (how you think)**

For example, you may often think or worry about something that is not likely to happen.

- **physical symptoms (how your body feels)**

For example, your anxiety may cause you to have:

- a very fast heartbeat
- problems breathing
- trembling or shaking
- sweating
- dizziness
- an upset stomach

- **behavioural symptoms (what you do)**

For example, you may avoid places or things that cause you a lot of anxiety, like public places or parties.



At times, it's normal for everyone to have some of these symptoms. If you have them often, they are very strong or they get in the way of your daily life, you may have an anxiety disorder.

Are there different kinds of anxiety disorders?

There are many different kinds. What causes the fear or anxiety is what makes the disorders different. Some people may have more than 1 anxiety disorder.

Some different kinds of anxiety disorders include:

Phobias

A phobia is a strong fear of something that may not cause any danger.

Some common examples of phobias include a fear of:

- animals (for example, dogs or snakes)
- heights
- closed-in spaces (for example, elevators or airplanes)
- seeing blood or getting a needle

Social anxiety disorder

This is a strong fear of social situations. People with this disorder worry about being watched or judged by other people or being embarrassed in public. They may be afraid of meeting or talking with new people, eating in public or speaking in a group.

Panic disorder

Someone has a panic disorder if they often have **panic attacks** without warning. Panic attacks are sudden and very strong feelings of fear. During a panic attack, people have such strong body signs (like a very fast heartbeat or problems breathing) that they may believe they are losing control or are going to die.

People with this disorder worry about when and where the next panic attack will happen. They stay away from places or things they think might cause a panic attack. Sometimes their worry is so strong that they can't leave their home.

Generalized anxiety disorder

People with this disorder can't stop worrying about everyday things. They expect bad things will happen, even if there is no real reason to worry. Their worry or anxiety gets in the way of their daily life.

How can they be treated?

Medicine, therapy or combining these together can help treat anxiety disorders. A healthy lifestyle can also help manage your anxiety.



Medicine

The 2 most common types of medicines are:

- **Antidepressant medicines**

These medicines are most often used to treat depression, but they can also help with anxiety disorders. Examples of antidepressant medicines used to treat anxiety disorders include:

- paroxetine
- sertraline
- venlafaxine XR



It may take many weeks after starting these medicines before you notice your symptoms getting better.

- **Benzodiazepines**

These medicines work more quickly to reduce your anxiety and relax you. They are often used if you are in crisis. Depending on the kind of medicine, you may feel better within 30 minutes to 4 hours.

Benzodiazepines are usually only prescribed for a short time because they have strong side effects and can be addictive.

They are not used to treat anxiety over a longer time.

Examples of benzodiazepines used to treat anxiety disorders include:

- alprazolam
- clonazepam
- lorazepam

Therapy

The type of therapy most often used to treat anxiety disorders is called **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)**. CBT can help you to change how you think and what you do during certain situations. These changes can help you feel better.

Therapy helps you face your fears and learn new skills to cope with things that cause your anxiety.

Healthy lifestyle:

A healthy lifestyle can help your mental and physical health. Here are some things you can do to stay healthy and reduce your anxiety:

Eat healthy foods

Eating a variety of healthy foods will help keep your body strong. This will help you cope with stress better.



Exercise

Exercise helps reduce stress and improve your mood. Try to do at least 2 and a half hours of medium to heavy exercise each week. Talk to your health care team before starting a new exercise routine.



Stop smoking and reduce caffeine

Nicotine (in cigarettes) and caffeine are stimulants. This means they speed up your body instead of relaxing it. This can make symptoms of anxiety worse. Try to reduce or remove nicotine or caffeine from your daily habits.



Limit alcohol.

For a short time, alcohol may help you feel more calm and relaxed. But, over a longer time it can add to your symptoms of anxiety. Alcohol can also affect how your prescription medicines work. Talk to your health care team about a safe amount of alcohol for you.

Get enough sleep

When you get enough sleep you can cope with stress better. Most people need between 7 and 9 hours of sleep to feel their best. This is different for everyone. Going to bed and getting up at the same time each day can help.



Do relaxation exercises

Relaxation exercises like deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation can help decrease your anxiety. Talk to your health care team about how to do these properly. Try to do 15 to 20 minutes of relaxation exercises a day.



How do I help my friend or family member with an anxiety disorder?

- **Learn about anxiety.**
Learning more about anxiety and how it's treated can help you support your loved one. Visit the websites at the back of this booklet or one of our **Patient and Family Libraries** for more information.
- **Ask how they would like to be helped.**
Your loved one knows best about their illness. Ask them how they would like you to help, and listen closely to the answer.
- **Help them practice their skills.**
If your loved one is learning a new skill to deal with their anxiety (such as deep breathing), offer to practice it with them.
- **Let them recover at their own pace.**
It's good to encourage your loved one to face their fears, but let them decide when they are ready. Don't pressure them to take a bigger step than they feel ready for.

- **Be patient.**
Recovery takes time. Be patient and praise your loved one for the steps they take, no matter how small.
- **Look after yourself and take breaks.**
Supporting a friend or family member can be difficult. Make sure you take time for yourself and keep your own social support system.

Where can I go for more information?

Visit one of our University Health Network **Patient and Family Libraries**:

The Princess Margaret Cancer Centre

Patient & Family Library

Main Floor, Atrium

☎ Phone: 416 946 4501, extension 5383

✉ Email: patienteducationpmh@uhn.on.ca

Toronto General Hospital

Peter and Melanie Munk Patient & Family Learning Centre and Library

Norman Urquhart Building – Level 1

☎ Phone: 416 340 4800, extension 5951

✉ Email: tgpen@uhn.ca

Toronto Rehab – University Centre

Sun Life Patient & Family Resource Centre

Main Floor, Room 1-123

☎ Phone: 416 597 3422, extension 3558

✉ Email: torontorehabhealthinfo@uhn.ca

Toronto Western Hospital

Paul B. Helliwell Patient & Family Library

West Wing – 1st floor

☎ Phone: 416 603 6277

✉ Email: twpfl@uhn.ca



Reliable websites on anxiety disorders:

Anxiety Disorders Association of Canada

www.anxietycanada.ca

Anxiety Disorders Association of America

www.adaa.org

National Institute of Mental Health

www.nimh.nih.gov/anxiety

Anxiety Research and Treatment Centre

www.anxietytreatment.ca

Canadian Network for Mood and Anxiety Treatments

www.canmat.org

If you are having thoughts of harming yourself at any time, please call the Distress Centre Helpline at 416 408 HELP (4357) or visit your closest emergency department.