

# ANXIETY DISORDERS

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## Key Points

- Anxiety disorders are mental health conditions characterized by excessive, uncontrollable fear or worry that interferes with daily life
- Most common psychiatric condition, affecting 30% of adults during their lifetime, with higher prevalence in women
- Main types include:
  - Separation anxiety disorder
  - Selective mutism
  - Specific phobias
  - Social anxiety disorder
  - Agoraphobia
  - Panic disorder
  - Generalized anxiety disorder
- Causes likely involve both genetic and environmental factors
- Diagnosis requires:
  - Physical exam and medical history
  - Blood tests to rule out physical conditions
  - Evaluation by mental health professional using DSM-5 criteria
- Treatment options include:
  - Medications (antidepressants, benzodiazepines, beta-blockers)
  - Psychotherapy (particularly CBT and exposure therapy)
  - Stress management techniques
  - Support groups and family education

# About Anxiety Disorders

**Definition:** A group of mental health disorders in which the individual responds to certain situations with excessive fear or worry, and/or sweating and heart pounding that are out of proportion to the situation, cannot be controlled, and interfere with daily life. These disorders cannot be better explained by a physical disorder or another mental disorder.

**How common are anxiety disorders?** Anxiety disorders are the most common psychiatric condition. 30% of adults develop anxiety disorders during their lifetime. Women have anxiety disorders more often than men.

## Types of anxiety disorders

### Separation anxiety disorder

An overwhelming fear or anxiety about separation from an attachment figure. The feeling is not appropriate for the person's age, persists (at least 4 weeks in children and 6 months in adults) and interferes with functioning. A person with separation anxiety disorder may constantly worry about losing the person closest to him or her, will refuse to sleep away from home, or may have nightmares about potential separation. May experience physical symptoms of distress when faced with or anticipating separation.<sup>1</sup>

### Selective Mutism

Children do not speak in certain situations where they are expected to speak, such as in school, due to fear and anxiety, even though they will speak in other situations, such as at home. This lack of speech can lead to academic problems and social isolation. It is identified when a child enters school, around age 5. Selective mutism is outgrown by many children.<sup>2</sup>

### Specific phobias

An overwhelming and intense fear of an object, situation or activity that is not dangerous. The fear is known by the individual to be excessive but cannot be overcome. The object is actively avoided or faced with great fear and interferes with daily functioning. May last for 6 months or more. Examples are fear of flying, fear of heights, fear of spiders.

### Social anxiety disorder (social phobia)

An intense fear of being judged, embarrassed, humiliated, rejected or looked down on in social interactions. The fear or anxiety is out of proportion to the actual threat posed by the social situation. Individuals try to avoid these situations at all costs and only endure them with great trepidation. The fear negatively affects daily functioning and must last 6 months to make the diagnosis. Examples are fear of public speaking, eating or drinking in public, and meeting new people.<sup>2</sup>

## Agoraphobia

The intense fear of situations where escape may be difficult, embarrassing or help may not be available. The distress is out of proportion to the actual situation. The situation is actively avoided, requires a companion present or is tolerated with severe anxiety. Without treatment, an agoraphobic may be so affected they cannot leave the house. To make the diagnosis, the fear must be intensely disturbing, or it results in severe difficulty in functioning for 6 months or more.

## Panic disorder

A condition that involves repeated panic attacks without warning. Panic attacks are defined as sudden intense bouts of fear or discomfort that reach a peak within minutes. During an attack, 4 of the following symptoms occur: palpitations, pounding heart, or rapid heart rate; sweating, sensations of shortness of breath or smothering, trembling or shaking, chest pain, feeling dizzy, lightheaded or faint, numbness or tingling, chills or hot flashes, nausea or abdominal pains, feeling detached, fear of losing control, and fear of dying.<sup>1</sup> Due to the severity of the symptoms, some people believe they are having a heart attack and go to the emergency room. Physician needs to rule out that the symptoms experienced are not due to another mental health or physical disorder. The mean age of onset of panic disorder is 20-24. Panic attacks may occur with other mental disorders.

## Generalized anxiety disorder

A condition in which there is fear, worry and a constant feeling of overwhelm about certain events or daily activities. The ongoing worry is associated with 3 of the following physical symptoms: restlessness, easy fatigue, difficulty concentrating or mind going blank, irritability, muscle tension, or sleep disturbance. 1 Job responsibilities, appointments, family health, and chores are all examples of everyday events that cause extreme and unrealistic worry. To make the diagnosis these symptoms must occur more days than not for 6 months.

## Causes of anxiety disorders

Researchers do not know what causes anxiety disorders, but they believe it involves a combination of genetic and environmental influences. Anxiety disorders run in biological families, suggesting genetics plays a role. An individual who has a first degree relative with an anxiety disorder, is at an increased risk of developing one. A prolonged stress or a traumatic event, both significant environmental influences, can also result in an anxiety disorder.<sup>3</sup>

## Diagnosis of anxiety disorders

The first step in diagnosis is to visit a Primary Care Physician. The doctor will collect medical history including current medications, a family history of anxiety disorders, and perform a physical exam. Blood tests will be ordered to rule out hyperthyroidism and other physical conditions.

The provider will then refer the individual to a psychologist or a psychiatrist. DSM-5 is a manual with diagnostic criteria to diagnose psychiatric disorders and will be used to make a diagnosis. The diagnosis will be based on 1.) The duration and intensity of the reported symptoms. 2.) Discussion

of how daily life is impacted by the symptoms. 3.) The doctor's observation of the individual's behavior and attitude in the office.<sup>3</sup>

Note: Many individuals do not seek help because they do not realize there are effective treatments for their condition.

## Treatment of anxiety disorders

Most anxiety disorders will respond best to medication and/or psychotherapy. The treatments can be alone or in combination.

### Medication

Will not cure anxiety disorders but can offer significant relief from the symptoms.

#### Antidepressants

Although these medications are mainly for depression, they are also beneficial for anxiety disorders. They increase serotonin levels in the brain which improves mood and reduces stress. Antidepressants take 6-8 weeks to start working.

Examples: SSRIs, SNRIs, and Tricyclic Antidepressants.

#### Benzodiazepines

Rapidly decrease panic, worry and anxiety. Good short-term treatment for anxiety disorders. Can quickly build up a tolerance. Since there is an addiction potential, they must be taken carefully.

Examples: Alprazolam, clonazepam, diazepam, and lorazepam.

#### Beta-Blockers

Decrease some of the physical symptoms of anxiety disorders including rapid heartbeat, trembling and shaking,

Example: Propranolol

### Psychotherapy

Known as "talk therapy", a set of approaches to help the individual identify and change unhealthy thoughts, behaviors and emotions. Strategies are taught to improve knowledge, understanding, and coping with anxiety disorders.

#### Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)

Most common method of psychotherapy to handle anxiety disorders. Teaches the individual to take notice and identify behaviors and thought patterns that lead to bothersome feelings and then to work toward changing those thoughts and reactions to stressful situations.

## Exposure therapy

The practitioner creates a safe space and then gradually exposes individuals to what they fear. This technique teaches individuals to become more confident and secure when facing their fears.<sup>3</sup>

## Other helpful approaches include:<sup>2</sup>

- Stress management techniques
- Meditation
- Educating family and friends
- Support groups

## Summary

Anxiety Disorders can be very disabling for patients. Luckily there are multiple options for treatment, whether medications, therapy, or both, providing relief from unwanted symptoms. Providers need to know that anxiety disorders are extremely common and to approach anxiety disorders by doing a basic physical exam, history, and lab tests, and if not comfortable treating, to refer the patient to a psychologist or psychiatrist.

## References

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3. “*Anxiety Disorders.*” my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases. Cleveland Clinic Foundation. June 3, 2024