



Why Anxiety Shows Up in Your Body: Chest, Stomach, Jaw

An explainer and body map worksheet · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)
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At a glance

- Anxiety is not only in your head. It is a whole-body alarm system.
- Tight chest, upset stomach, and a clenched jaw are common, and they have clear explanations.
- Mapping where you feel anxiety helps you catch it earlier and respond sooner.

Your body's alarm system

When your brain senses a threat, real or imagined, it activates the stress response, often called "fight, flight, or freeze." Stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol prepare your body to act. Your heart speeds up, muscles tense, and digestion slows down.

That response is useful when you need to run from danger. But the same alarm fires for an email from your boss, a hard conversation, or a 2 a.m. worry. The body can't always tell the difference.

Where anxiety commonly shows up, and why

Area	What you might feel	What's happening
Chest and heart	Tightness, pounding or racing heart, feeling like you can't take a full breath	Your heart pumps faster to send blood to muscles. Shallow, fast breathing tightens chest muscles.
Stomach and gut	Butterflies, nausea, cramps, loss of appetite, urgent trips to the bathroom	Digestion slows during stress. The gut and brain communicate constantly through the gut-brain axis.
Jaw, head, and face	Clenching, teeth grinding, headaches, tight forehead	Muscles brace for action. Many people clench without noticing, especially during sleep or focus.
Shoulders and neck	Raised, stiff, or aching shoulders	The body's natural "protect" posture pulls the shoulders up toward the ears.
Throat	A lump or tight feeling, trouble swallowing	Throat muscles tense as part of bracing.

Area	What you might feel	What's happening
Hands and legs	Shaking, tingling, restlessness, jelly legs	Extra blood flow and adrenaline prepare limbs to move.

Important: Many of these sensations can also come from medical conditions. If you have new, severe, or unexplained symptoms, especially chest pain, see a doctor. If you have chest pain with shortness of breath, call 911.

What the research says

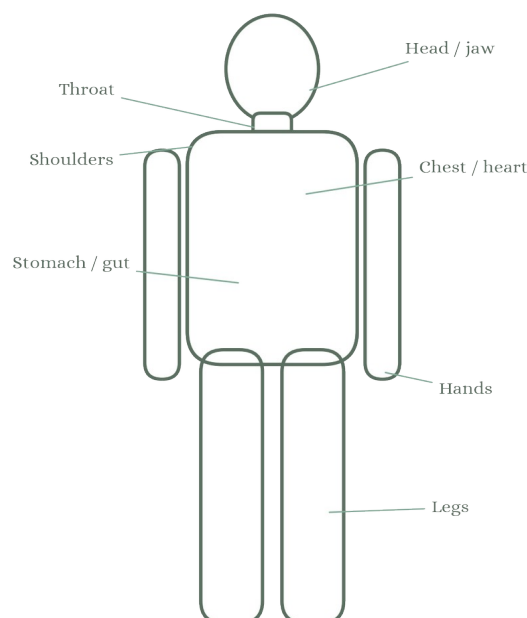
In a study of over 700 people, researchers found that emotions produce consistent, mappable patterns of bodily sensation, with fear and anxiety felt most strongly in the chest (Nummenmaa et al., 2014).

The gut and brain are connected through nerves, hormones, and immune signals, which helps explain why stress so often shows up as stomach upset (Mayer, 2011).

Learning to notice and tolerate body sensations, rather than fear them, is a core part of effective anxiety treatment such as CBT for panic (Craske & Barlow, 2007).

Tool: My Anxiety Body Map

Think of a recent anxious moment. On the body below, shade or circle where you felt it. Use a different colour or symbol for each sensation, such as "T" for tight, "H" for hot, or "B" for buzzing.



Reflect on your map

The first place I usually notice anxiety is:

When I feel it there, my thoughts are often saying:

A sensation I tend to fear or misread is:

What actually helps that part of my body relax:

Quick body-based resets

If you feel it in your...	Try this
Chest	Breathe in through your nose for 4, then out slowly through pursed lips for 6. Repeat five times. A longer exhale signals safety.
Stomach	Place a warm hand on your belly and breathe so your hand rises and falls. Sip something warm.
Jaw and face	Let your tongue rest on the floor of your mouth and part your teeth slightly. Gently massage the hinge of your jaw.
Shoulders	Lift your shoulders to your ears for 5 seconds, then drop them. Repeat three times.
Whole body	Name it kindly: "This is my alarm system. It's uncomfortable, and it will pass."

When to reach out for support

If physical anxiety symptoms are frequent, frightening, or making you avoid places and activities, therapy can help. Approaches like CBT teach your body and brain that these sensations are uncomfortable, but not dangerous.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

Craske, M. G., & Barlow, D. H. (2007). *Mastery of your anxiety and panic: Therapist guide* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.

Mayer, E. A. (2011). Gut feelings: The emerging biology of gut-brain communication. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 12(8), 453–466.

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