

Anxiety disorders

What is an anxiety disorder?

Anxiety disorders are a group of common mental health problems. About one in four people have an anxiety disorder that needs treatment at some time in their life. Other people have less severe anxieties, such as a fear of spiders or snakes, for which they do not seek treatment.

Anxiety disorders include:

- **Generalised anxiety disorder** – a constant, apprehensive feeling that ‘something awful will happen’ to your family, health, job or finances.
- **Social phobias** – a fear of embarrassment or humiliation in social situations, or scrutiny from others, such as public speaking.
- **Specific phobias** – extreme, apprehensive fear of specific objects and situations (phobia), such as a fear of spiders, flying on an aeroplane or *claustrophobia*, a common fear of confined places.
- **Panic disorders** – sudden attacks of intense terror, often for no reason.
- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)** – recurring thoughts and impulses (actions) that intrude and are hard to control, such as excessive cleaning or hand washing.
- **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** – high anxiety and recurrent fear of past traumatic events, may include ‘flashbacks’ or night terrors.

Anxiety disorders which are untreated can lead to depression and other long-term physical and psychological problems.

What causes anxiety?

The causes vary from person to person and are not always easy to find. Some reasons include:

- a learnt response over time – such as learning to fear something after having seen others being fearful of it
- personality types – some people are naturally more anxious than others
- family traits
- imbalance in brain chemicals.

Problems often begin as a young adult and may be triggered by one or more major events in a person’s life. More women are affected than men.

What are the symptoms?

Anxiety comes in many forms and the symptoms can vary greatly from person to person.

The fear may be accompanied by tightness of the chest, palpitations (feeling that your heart is pounding), tingling (mostly in the hands), and ‘butterflies’ in the stomach.

Symptoms can include feeling breathless, dizzy, sweating and trembling, racing heart, dry mouth, chills or hot flushes, choking, nausea, stomach upset and pins and needles in the hands. Some people feel like they are going to lose control or die.

Most of the above symptoms are your body’s response to shallow, fast breathing (*hyperventilating*) and will disappear quickly with some slow, deep breathing.

There may be general symptoms of feeling tired or restless, problems with concentration and sleep, muscle tension, loss of appetite, constipation, headaches, and a loss of sex drive (*libido*).

Treatment

Doctors, psychologists, social workers and counsellors can help treat anxiety disorders using a combination of education, therapy, counselling and medications.

Education, therapy and counselling can help you understand your thoughts, emotions and behaviour and give you new ways to deal with your anxiety.

Medication may help control feelings of high anxiety. *Benzodiazepines* are a group of medications that may give short-term relief of symptoms when you cannot cope without extra help. They include diazepam (also known as *Valium*) and alprazolam (also known as *Xanax*). Care must be taken because these medications may be addictive and sedating. Antidepressants may be useful in treating some forms of anxiety.

Home care

Some simple techniques can help you manage your anxiety at home.

- Try meditation, muscle relaxation, reading and yoga.
- Exercise daily – this releases ‘feel good’ and naturally uplifting hormones called *endorphins*.
- Talk about your worries with someone you trust.
- Learn problem-solving skills.
- Find a balance between work, hobbies, family and social life, and try to remove factors that cause you stress.



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- Learn deep-breathing techniques to help you during a panic attack.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Limit alcohol and coffee intake.
- Do not smoke.
- Develop a good sleep pattern.
- Build your self-esteem and keep a positive outlook on life.

What to expect

With the right treatment and support, most people learn to recognise and cope with their symptoms.

If anxiety symptoms are not addressed, they may worsen, with long-term physical, social or psychological consequences.

Notes:

Seeking help



In a **medical emergency** go to the nearest hospital emergency department or call an ambulance (dial 000).



For other medical problems see your local doctor or health care professional.



For health advice from a Registered Nurse you can call **NURSE-ON-CALL 24 hours a day** on **1300 60 60 24** for the cost of a local call from anywhere in Victoria.*

NURSE-ON-CALL provides access to **interpreting services** for callers not confident with English. Call **1300 60 60 24**.

*Calls from mobile calls may be charged at a higher rate



Want to know more?

- Ask your local doctor or health care professional.
- Visit the **Better Health Channel**
www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au
- Contact your **local area mental health service**. After hours (in a crisis) contact your nearest hospital and ask for the Crisis Assessment and Treatment Team ('CAT Team').
- Phone **Lifeline** on 13 11 14 in a crisis.
- Contact the **Mental Health Foundation of Australia** (Victoria)
Phone (03) 9427 0406 www.mentalhealthvic.org.au
- Contact the **Anxiety Recovery Centre**
Phone (03) 9886 9377
www.arcvic.com.au
- Contact the **Anxiety Disorders Association of Victoria** (for support and information)
Phone (03) 9853 8089
www.adavic.org
- Phone the **Australian Psychological Society** (for psychologists in private practice)
Phone 1800 33 34 97 or (03) 8662 3300
www.psychology.org.au
- Contact **Reconnexion** (for specialist psychological counselling)
Phone 1300 27 32 66
www.reconnexion.org.au

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June 2008. Also available online at www.health.vic.gov.au/edfactsheets

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