

Anxiety: What You Need to Know



Anxiety can be a perfectly normal and healthy reaction to a stressful situation. Anxiety can help us cope with external dangers by increasing our awareness and getting our body ready to react. It can spur you into action and cause you to be more alert in situations that call for serious attention. It's only when excessive anxiety starts to affect your physical or mental health that you have cause for concern.

Causes and Symptoms

The causes of anxiety and panic are not fully understood. Life experience may trigger anxiety. Chemical imbalances in the brain can also play a role. These imbalances may run in the family.

Anxiety can express itself in different ways. It may be ongoing or come in bursts, lasting only a few minutes. Panic attacks are short, intense bursts of anxiety accompanied by a sense of dread and physical reactions such as heart pounding and sweating. Generalized anxiety is an ongoing condition that is not usually a direct result of a well-defined irrational fear (phobia).

What is Your Body Telling You?

Common ways your body tells you it's under too much stress include:

Chronic colds and flu: Stress can create a weakened immune system, which makes your body susceptible to cold and flu viruses. Build your immune system by getting lots of rest, drinking plenty of fluids and eating vitamin-rich foods

Insomnia: If you go to bed with a problem on your mind, your body gives you another shot of adrenaline every time you think about it. Before going to bed, settle down by taking a walk, drinking warm milk or taking a hot bath.

Headaches and sore muscles: The constant tension created by stress and anxiety makes your muscles rigid and sore. Tight neck and shoulder muscles make your head throb. To relieve the symptoms, stretch every couple of hours or do light exercises.

Stomach problems: Stress prompts secretions of stomach acid that can cause heartburn, stomach cramps or other digestive miseries. Avoid stomach irritants such as coffee, cigarettes, alcohol, hot peppers and mints. Soothe yourself with deep-breathing exercises and physical activities you enjoy, like bicycling or gardening.

Addictive behavior: Some people try to escape chronic stress by drinking too much alcohol, using drugs, overeating or falling into other addictive behavior patterns. But that only brings on more stress. Fight back by finding healthful ways to handle stress.

Evaluation, Counseling and Medication

It may be beneficial to make an appointment with a mental health professional to evaluate your anxiety. During the evaluation, you'll be asked about your symptoms and feelings. Answer these questions honestly and openly. You may need a physical exam to be sure that no underlying medical illness is causing your symptoms. You may also be evaluated for depression, which can develop along with anxiety. After you've been evaluated, the best treatment can be decided on. Treatment may include counseling and medications, as appropriate. With counseling, you will better understand what makes you feel anxious, develop skills to help cope with stress and learn ways to relax.

Coping with Anxiety

There are several things you can do to cope with anxiety:

- Exercise to relieve tension.
- Examine your life for stress and try to find ways to reduce it.
- Avoid caffeine and nicotine, which can make symptoms worse.
- Avoid alcohol or other drugs for relief.
- The more you worry, the worse anxiety gets. Identify what triggered your anxiety, and try to put this threat in perspective.
- You can't control everything about a situation. Change what you can and let the rest take its course.

