

Patient information from BMJ

Last published: Mar 13, 2023

Anxiety: what is it?

Everyone gets anxious from time to time. But if you worry so much that it stops you getting on with your life there are treatments that can help you feel less anxious.

We've brought together the best and most up-to-date research about anxiety to see what treatments work. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are best for you.

When worry becomes an illness

Anxiety is a normal human emotion. We all worry at times about things like money, our families, or our jobs. But some people get more anxious than others.

Anxiety becomes an illness when you worry so much that it interferes with your life. You can't stop worrying even though you try. You probably worry over lots of different things. Your worry is out of proportion, and it makes you feel ill and tired.

When worrying becomes an illness your doctor may say you have generalised anxiety disorder. We call it anxiety for short.

What are the symptoms?

When anxiety is an illness:

- you worry too much
- your worries have bothered you most days for the last six months
- you worry about lots of things at once, even when there is no particular reason to worry
- you can't stop or control your worrying, however hard you try.

Worrying in this way can stop you getting on with your life and daily activities. Perhaps you're too anxious to drive, or you worry about getting lost if you do. Or you won't go out because you're afraid something might happen to your home.

Other symptoms

For your doctor to diagnose anxiety you will also have at least three of these other symptoms:

Anxiety: what is it?

- you're restless and can't relax
- you get tired easily
- you can't concentrate
- you're irritable
- your muscles are tense
- you sleep badly.

Physical symptoms

Some people with anxiety also get physical symptoms. For example, you may get cold, clammy hands, have a dry mouth, or feel sick. Or, when you feel anxious, you may get diarrhoea, palpitations (which is when your heart beats faster or stronger than normal), headaches, or shortness of breath. These symptoms can be very frightening. But there is usually nothing physically wrong.

What will happen to me?

You'll probably never get rid of your worries completely. But getting professional help should help you control them so that they don't take over your life. Your life will no longer be full of worry. And your other symptoms (such as headaches or problems sleeping) should also improve.

The patient information from *BMJ Best Practice* is regularly updated. The most recent version of Best Practice can be found at bestpractice.bmj.com. This information is intended for use by health professionals. It is not a substitute for medical advice. It is strongly recommended that you independently verify any interpretation of this material and, if you have a medical problem, see your doctor.

Please see BMJ's full terms of use at: bmj.com/company/legal-information. BMJ does not make any representations, conditions, warranties or guarantees, whether express or implied, that this material is accurate, complete, up-to-date or fit for any particular purposes.

© BMJ Publishing Group Ltd 2024. All rights reserved.

What did you think about this patient information guide?

Complete the [online survey](#) or scan the QR code to help us to ensure our content is of the highest quality and relevant for patients. The survey is anonymous and will take around 5 minutes to complete.



BMJ Group