

# Illness Anxiety Disorder

## What is illness anxiety disorder?

Illness anxiety disorder is a mental health problem. It means that you worry a lot about having a serious illness or disease. You believe that minor symptoms mean that you have a major medical problem. This condition used to be called hypochondriasis disorder.

## What is the cause?

The exact cause of this disorder is not known. You are more at risk if you:

- Had a serious illness during childhood, or have family or friends with a serious disease
- Have family members who have hypochondriasis
- Had parents who overreacted to minor childhood illnesses or injuries
- Were abused as a child
- Have recently had a loss, such as the death of a friend; a divorce; or the loss of a job, pet, or home
- Have anxiety or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

Hypochondriasis can start at any age, but it usually starts during the young adult years. You may have been worried about medical problems for a long time.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may include:

- Being afraid that you have a certain medical condition even when medical tests show no problem
- Going to many healthcare providers or clinics looking for someone to agree that you have the problem
- Thinking that minor symptoms are proof that your health problem is real and has been missed or ignored by healthcare providers
- Being very concerned with normal body functions, like sweating
- Worrying about physical problems that a healthcare provider may not recognize, like a tired heart
- Worrying more after reading about a disease or knowing someone who is ill.

## How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider or therapist will ask about your symptoms, medical and family history, and any medicines you are taking. Your provider will make sure that you do not have a medical illness or drug or alcohol problem that could cause the symptoms. You may have tests or scans to check for causes of your symptoms.

## How is it treated?

This disorder may be treated with therapy, medicine, or both.

### Therapy

- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a way to help you identify and change views you have of yourself, the world, and the future. CBT can make you aware of unhealthy ways of thinking. It can also help you learn new ways to think and act. For example, you may get extra attention and care from family and friends when you are seen as being sick. CBT may help you find ways to get care and attention without having to be ill.
- Family therapy is often very helpful. Family therapy treats all members of the family rather than working with one person alone. It helps the whole family to make changes.

### Medicines

Medicines may help manage symptoms caused by anxiety, depression, or obsessions (ideas that you cannot stop thinking about). Your healthcare provider will work with you to select the best medicine. You may need to take more than one type of medicine.

## How can I take care of myself?

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is important.

- **Get support.** Talk with your family and friends. Consider joining a support group.
- **Learn ways to manage stress.** Ask for help at home and work when the load is too great to handle. Find ways to relax. For example, take up a hobby, listen to music, watch movies, or take walks. Try deep breathing exercises when you feel stressed.
- **Take care of your physical health.** Try to get at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Eat a healthy diet. Limit caffeine. If you smoke, quit. Avoid alcohol and drugs. Exercise according to your healthcare provider's instructions.
- **Check your medicines.** To help prevent problems, tell your healthcare provider and pharmacist about all of the medicines, natural remedies, vitamins, and other supplements that you take. Take all medicines as directed by your provider or therapist. It's very important to take your medicine even when you are feeling and thinking well. Without the medicine, your symptoms may not improve or may get worse. Talk to your provider if you have problems taking your medicine or if the medicines don't seem to be working.
- **Contact your healthcare provider or therapist** if you have any questions or your symptoms seem to be getting worse.

Get emergency care if you or a loved one has serious thoughts of suicide or self-harm, violence, or harming others. Seek immediate help if you have severe chest pain or trouble breathing.

You can get more information from:

- National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)  
800-950-NAMI  
<http://www.nami.org>
- Mental Health America  
800-969-6642  
<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/>

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