

# Generalized Anxiety Disorder

## What is generalized anxiety disorder?

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is a condition in which you have fears and uncontrollable worries that last for at least 6 months. If you have GAD, you worry a lot about everyday problems. You feel tense and nervous much of the time. You worry that something bad is going to happen even when there is little reason to think that way. You know that you worry too much, but you are not able to stop.

GAD can last many years and sometimes your entire lifetime.

## What is the cause?

The exact cause of this disorder is not known.

- The brain is made up of cells called neurons, and chemicals called neurotransmitters. These chemicals affect your mood, emotions and behaviors. The brain cells need the right balance of these chemicals to function normally. People with this disorder often have too little or too much of some of these chemicals in their brain.
- Generalized anxiety disorder tends to run in families. It is not known if this is caused by genes passed from parent to child. It may also be that parents fear and worry a lot, and children learn this behavior from their parents.
- Stressful life events and situations also play a major part. Anxiety can be triggered by alcohol or some drugs. Medical conditions can also cause anxiety. Heart problems, breathing problems, lack of vitamins, or thyroid problems can cause anxiety symptoms.
- Some medicines can cause anxiety or make it worse. These include asthma medicines, caffeine and stimulant medicines, and steroids such as prednisone.
- Anxiety is more common if you have few friends, family, and activities. Poor diet and lack of daily exercise may also make anxiety disorders more likely.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms include too much worrying that you can't control about many things. You may be short-tempered and unable to focus or concentrate because of the worrying. Physical symptoms may include:

- Muscle tension
- Sleep problems
- Nausea, sweating or shaking
- Having a very fast heartbeat
- Feeling out of breath or like you are going to faint
- Needing to go to the bathroom often

## How is it diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider or therapist will ask about your symptoms. He or she will make sure you do not have a medical illness or drug or alcohol problem that could cause the symptoms.

## How is it treated?

### Medicines

Several types of medicines can help treat anxiety. Your healthcare provider will work with you to select the best medicine. You may need to take more than one type of medicine.

### Therapy

Seeing a therapist can help. There are several kinds of therapy that can help a person with anxiety. Support groups are also very helpful.

### Other Treatments

Claims have been made that certain herbal and dietary products help control anxiety symptoms. Supplements are not tested or standardized and may vary in strength and effects. They may have side effects and are not always safe. Talk with your provider before you try herbs or dietary supplements to treat your condition.

Learning ways to relax may help. Yoga and meditation may also be helpful. You may want to talk with your healthcare provider about using these methods along with medicines and psychotherapy.

## How can I take care of myself?

- **Get support.** Talk with family and friends. Consider joining a support group in your area. Go to a stress management class in your local community.
- **Learn to manage stress.** Ask for help at home and work when the load is too much 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 and don't skip meals. Low blood sugar can make you feel more nervous. Limit caffeine. If you smoke, quit. Avoid alcohol and drugs. Exercise according to your healthcare provider's instructions. Regular exercise can help calm you and make it easier for you to deal with stress.
- **Check your medicines.** To help prevent problems, tell your healthcare provider and pharmacist about all the medicines, natural remedies, vitamins, and other supplements that you take.
- **Contact your healthcare provider or therapist** if you have any questions or your symptoms seem to be getting worse.

For more information, contact:

National Institute of Mental Health  
866-615-NIMH (6464)  
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/>

Mental Health America  
800-969-NMHA (6642)  
<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/>

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