

Phobias

What is a phobia?

A phobia is feeling dread or panic when you face a certain activity, event, or object. The fear is not related to being in actual danger. A phobia causes you distress or problems in your life.

There are many kinds of phobias. Some common ones are:

- Fear of social situations
- Fear of germs
- Fear of heights
- Fear of enclosed spaces
- Fear of water
- Fear of snakes

What is the cause?

The exact cause of this disorder is not known. There are several theories about why some people develop phobias.

- 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 phobias may have too little or too much of some of these chemicals in their brain.
- Some phobias often start after having a bad experience. For instance, if you almost drowned once, you may develop a phobia about water.
- Most of the time, people have phobias about something that could be dangerous.

Phobias are much more common in women than in men.

What are the symptoms?

Seeing a picture, or just thinking about what you fear may make you very anxious. If you are exposed to the thing you fear, you have symptoms such as:

- A pounding heart
- Vomiting or diarrhea
- Shaking
- Sweating
- Feeling like you are choking or can't breathe
- Being dizzy, faint, or lightheaded

The fear is overwhelming. You may change your life, such as changing jobs that require you to face heights or fly on planes, if those things cause intense fear.

How is it diagnosed?

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

How is it treated?

Phobias can be successfully treated with psychotherapy and medicine.

Medicine

Certain medicines can be very helpful while you are learning how to confront the object of your phobia. Other medicines can also be taken right before a scary situation. Your healthcare provider will work with you to select the best medicine. You may need to take more than one type of medicine.

Therapy

One type of behavior therapy is called flooding. This involves overloading you with whatever it is that you are afraid of. Another technique is called exposure with response prevention. For example, if you wash your hands all the time because you are afraid of germs, the therapist might have you touch something dirty. Then the two of you might stand at the sink without washing hands until the anxiety goes away. Desensitization slowly gets you used to the idea of the feared object or situation.

These therapies teach you that you can safely be around what you fear. Over time, the fear reaches a certain point and then decreases.

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. Hypnosis can also help. 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. Realize you are not alone and that your anxiety can be overcome. You may be able to face situations that make you anxious if someone you trust is with you.
- **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.

Sometimes people will go to great lengths to try to deal with a phobia by themselves. It is easier and healthier to get the right treatment instead. Do not be embarrassed about asking for help.

For more information, contact:

- 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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