

Learning About Generalized Anxiety Disorder



What is generalized anxiety disorder?

We all worry. It's a normal part of life. But when you have generalized anxiety disorder, you worry about lots of things and have a hard time stopping your worry. This worry or anxiety interferes with your relationships, work, and life.

What causes it?

The cause of generalized anxiety disorder is not known. Some studies show that it might be passed down through families. Several things can cause symptoms of anxiety. They include some health problems, some medicines, too much caffeine, and illegal drugs such as cocaine.

What are the symptoms?

Generalized anxiety disorder can make you feel worried and stressed about many things almost every day. You may have a hard time controlling your worry.

Symptoms include:

- Feeling tired or cranky. You may have a hard time concentrating.
- Having headaches or muscle aches.
- Feeling shaky, sweating, or having hot flashes.
- Feeling lightheaded, sick to your stomach, or out of breath.
- Feeling like you can't relax. Or being startled easily.
- Having problems falling or staying asleep.

How is it diagnosed?

Your doctor will ask about your health and how often you worry or feel anxious. People with generalized anxiety disorder have more worry and stress than normal. They feel worried and stressed about many things almost every day. And these feelings have lasted for at least 6 months.

Your doctor also may ask about other symptoms, like whether you:

- Feel restless.

- Feel tired.
- Have a hard time thinking or feel that your mind goes blank.
- Feel cranky.
- Have tense muscles.
- Have sleep problems.

A physical exam and tests can help make sure that your symptoms aren't caused by a different condition, such as a thyroid problem.

How is it treated?

Counseling and medicine can both work to treat anxiety. The two are often used along with lifestyle changes.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is a type of counseling that's used to help treat anxiety. In CBT, you learn how to notice and replace thoughts that make you feel worried. It also can help you learn how to relax when you worry.

Applied relaxation therapy may also be used. Your counselor might ask you to imagine a calming situation. This can help you relax.

Medicines can help. These medicines are often also used for depression. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are often tried first. But there are other medicines that your doctor may use. You may need to try a few medicines to find one that works well.

Many people feel better by getting regular exercise, eating healthy meals, and getting good sleep. Mindfulness—focusing on things in the present moment—also can help reduce your anxiety.

What can you expect when you have it?

Having anxiety can be upsetting. Some people might feel less worried and stressed after a couple of months of treatment. But for other people, it might take longer to feel better.

Reaching out to people for help is important. Try not to isolate yourself. Let your family and friends help you. Find someone you can trust and confide in. Talk to that person.

When you know what anxiety is—and how you can get help for it—you can start to learn new ways of thinking. This can help you cope and work through your anxiety.

Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety. Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

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