

Patient information from the BMJ Group

Anxiety

Everyone gets anxious from time to time. But if you worry so much that it stops you getting on with your life, you can have treatments to 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 even 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

You will also have at least three of these other symptoms.

- You're restless and can't relax.
- You get tired easily.
- You can't concentrate.

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- 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 than normal), headaches, or feel short of breath. These symptoms can be very frightening. But there is usually nothing medically wrong.

What treatments work?

Your doctor might advise you to try a talking treatment (psychological treatment) or medicines to help your anxiety. It's not clear from research whether medicines or talking treatments work best. So your doctor may recommend both. Different treatments suit different people.

Talking treatments

There are two talking treatments that work well for anxiety. They are called **cognitive behaviour therapy** and **applied relaxation**. If you have them, your symptoms should get better and you should feel calmer. But these treatments don't work instantly. And you will need to practise the things you're taught, while you're at home.

During these treatments you work with a therapist who has been trained in helping people with mental health problems. You normally see someone once a week over a period of several weeks. Sometimes, you may need to see someone more often. Sessions normally last between one and two hours.

Here are the two types of talking treatment used. Sometimes they are used together.

Cognitive behaviour therapy is a talking treatment where you and your therapist work together to try to change the way you think and how you behave. Usually, the therapist tries to find out which thoughts make you worried and ill. For example, every time you want to drive you might think, "I could crash the car". Or every time the phone rings you might think, "Someone must have died". You then learn ways to be more positive. For example, you might learn to change the thought "My boss thinks I'm hopeless" to "I must be good at my job. I've never been laid off, my colleagues like me and I always meet my deadlines".

Applied relaxation involves doing exercises to relax your muscles. In some exercises, you relax groups of muscles, such as those in your shoulders and neck. In other exercises, you relax your whole body. When your body relaxes, your mind also seems to relax or calm down. You may also be shown how breathing can help you relax and how you can

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use your imagination to help you relax (visualisation). You can practise these techniques at home.

Medicines

Some medicines work fast to make you feel better if your anxiety is very bad. Others are used to treat anxiety in the long term.

Antidepressants can help reduce feelings of anxiety, and help you sleep better and feel more comfortable around people. But they take at least three weeks to start working. Antidepressants often used to treat anxiety include sertraline (brand name Lustral), paroxetine (brand name Seroxat), escitalopram (brand name Ciprallex), and imipramine. Antidepressants can make you feel drowsy and dizzy. They can also cause falls, nausea, and sexual problems. If antidepressants help your anxiety, you'll usually take them for at least six months.

Drugs called **benzodiazepines**, such as diazepam and lorazepam, work quickly. They can help you relax and feel less worried. But you shouldn't take them for more than two weeks as you can become addicted to them. You may feel drowsy when you take one of these drugs. And you may have trouble remembering things or concentrating. You shouldn't take a benzodiazepine if you're pregnant.

You might be given a drug called **hydroxyzine** if your anxiety suddenly gets much worse. It works within a few hours and can help you feel calmer and more relaxed. Brand names for hydroxyzine include Atarax and Ucerax. Treatment with hydroxyzine might make you feel drowsy. You will usually only be prescribed hydroxyzine for a few weeks.

Pregabalin can help you feel less anxious. But it seems to take about four weeks to work. The brand name for pregabalin is Lyrica. It can cause mild side effects, such as feeling dizzy and sleepy, getting headaches, and having a dry mouth.

Buspirone can help reduce anxiety and fear and help you sleep better. It may also help with physical symptoms such as sweating. But it takes about six weeks to start working. It might make you feel sick and dizzy. And it may not work so well if you've recently been treated with a benzodiazepine.

Things you can do for yourself

Talking treatment doesn't end when you stop going to a therapist. It is meant to teach you how to help yourself. Then, if old ways of thinking and behaving come back, you can be your own therapist. You can also use what you have learnt about relaxation. This is a good approach for people who want to help themselves get better.

Your doctor may suggest you join a local support group for people with anxiety. Sharing your feelings may help you feel more able to cope and get on with your life.

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Anxiety in children

Some treatments have also been tested for children. We know that cognitive behaviour therapy and some antidepressants work for children with anxiety. But antidepressants may have serious side effects in children, so they're not often used.

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 get better.

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