

Generalized Anxiety Disorder:

When Worry Gets
Out of Control



National Institute
of Mental Health

Do you often find yourself worrying about everyday issues for no obvious reason? Are you always waiting for disaster to strike or excessively worried about things such as health, money, family, work, or school?

If so, you may have a type of anxiety disorder called generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). GAD can make daily life feel like a constant state of worry, fear, and dread. The good news is GAD is treatable. Learn more about the symptoms of GAD and how to find help.

What is generalized anxiety disorder?

Occasional anxiety is a normal part of life. Many people may worry about things such as health, money, or family problems. But people with GAD feel extremely worried or nervous more frequently about these and other things—even when there is little or no reason to worry about them. GAD usually involves a persistent feeling of anxiety or dread that interferes with how you live your life. It is not the same as occasionally worrying about things or experiencing anxiety due to stressful life events. People living with GAD experience frequent anxiety for months, if not years.

GAD develops slowly. It often starts around age 30, although it can occur in childhood. The disorder is more common in women than in men.

What are the signs and symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder?

People with GAD may:

- Worry excessively about everyday things
- Have trouble controlling their worries or feelings of nervousness
- Know that they worry much more than they should
- Feel restless and have trouble relaxing
- Have a hard time concentrating
- Startle easily
- Have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep

- Tire easily or feel tired all the time
- Have headaches, muscle aches, stomachaches, or unexplained pains
- Have a hard time swallowing
- Tremble or twitch
- Feel irritable or “on edge”
- Sweat a lot, feel lightheaded, or feel out of breath
- Have to go to the bathroom frequently

Children and teens with GAD often worry excessively about:

- Their performance in activities such as school or sports
- Catastrophes, such as earthquakes or war
- The health of others, such as family members

Adults with GAD are often highly nervous about everyday circumstances, such as:

- Job security or performance
- Health
- Finances
- The health and well-being of their children or other family members
- Being late
- Completing household chores and other responsibilities

Both children and adults with GAD may experience physical symptoms such as pain, fatigue, or shortness of breath that make it hard to function and that interfere with daily life.

Symptoms may fluctuate over time and are often worse during times of stress—for example—with a physical illness, during school exams, or during a family or relationship conflict.

What causes generalized anxiety disorder?

Risk for GAD can run in families. Several parts of the brain and biological processes play a key role in fear and anxiety. By learning more about how the brain and body function in people with anxiety disorders, researchers may be able to develop better treatments. Researchers have also found that external causes, such as experiencing a traumatic event or being in a stressful environment, may put you at higher risk for developing GAD.

How is generalized anxiety disorder treated?

If you think you're experiencing symptoms of GAD, talk to a health care provider. After discussing your history, a health care provider may conduct a physical exam to ensure that an unrelated physical problem is not causing your symptoms. A health care provider may refer you to a mental health professional, such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, or clinical social worker. The first step to effective treatment is to get a diagnosis, usually from a mental health professional.

GAD is generally treated with psychotherapy (sometimes called "talk therapy"), medication, or both. Speak with a health care provider about the best treatment for you.

Psychotherapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), a research-supported type of psychotherapy, is commonly used to treat GAD. CBT teaches you different ways of thinking, behaving, and reacting to situations that help you feel less anxious and worried. CBT has been well studied and is the gold standard for psychotherapy.

Another treatment option for GAD is acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). ACT takes a different approach than CBT to negative thoughts and uses strategies such as mindfulness and goal setting to reduce your discomfort and anxiety. Compared to CBT, ACT is a newer form of psychotherapy treatment, so less data are available on its effectiveness. However, different therapies work for different types of people, so it can be helpful to discuss what form of therapy may be right for you with a mental health professional.

For more information on psychotherapy, visit www.nimh.nih.gov/psychotherapies.

Medication

Health care providers may prescribe medication to treat GAD. Different types of medication can be effective, including:

- Antidepressants, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)
- Anti-anxiety medications, such as benzodiazepines

SSRI and SNRI antidepressants are commonly used to treat depression, but they also can help treat the symptoms of GAD. They may take several weeks to start working. These medications also may cause side effects, such as headaches, nausea, or difficulty sleeping. These side effects are usually not severe for most people, especially if the dose starts off low and is increased slowly over time. Talk to your health care provider about any side effects that you may experience.

Benzodiazepines, which are anti-anxiety sedative medications, also can be used to manage severe forms of GAD. These medications can be very effective in rapidly decreasing anxiety, but some people build up a tolerance to them and need higher and higher doses to get the same effect. Some people even become dependent on them. Therefore, a health care provider may prescribe them only for brief periods of time if you need them.

Buspirone is another anti-anxiety medication that can be helpful in treating GAD. Unlike benzodiazepines, buspirone is not a sedative and has less potential to be addictive. Buspirone needs to be taken for 3–4 weeks for it to be fully effective.

Both psychotherapy and medication can take some time to work. Many people try more than one medication before finding the best one for them. A health care provider can work with you to find the best medication, dose, and duration of treatment for you.

For basic information about these and other mental health medications, visit www.nimh.nih.gov/medications. Visit the Food and Drug Administration's website (www.fda.gov/drugsatfda) for the latest warnings, patient medication guides, and information on newly approved medications.

Support Groups

Some people with anxiety disorders might benefit from joining a self-help or support group and sharing their problems and achievements with others. Support groups are available both in person and online. However, any advice you receive from a support group member should be used cautiously and does not replace treatment recommendations from a health care provider.

Healthy Habits

Practicing a healthy lifestyle also can help combat anxiety, although this alone cannot replace treatment. Researchers have found that implementing certain healthy choices in daily life—such as reducing caffeine intake and getting enough sleep—can reduce anxiety symptoms when paired with standard care—such as psychotherapy and medication.

Stress management techniques, such as exercise, mindfulness, and meditation, also can reduce anxiety symptoms and enhance the effects of psychotherapy. You can learn more about how these techniques benefit your treatment by talking with a health care provider.

To learn more ways to take care of your mental health, visit www.nimh.nih.gov/mymentalhealth.

How can I support myself and others with generalized anxiety disorder?

Educate Yourself

A good way to help yourself or a loved one who may be struggling with GAD is to seek information. Research the warning signs, learn about treatment options, and keep up to date with current research.

Communicate

If you are experiencing GAD symptoms, have an honest conversation about how you're feeling with someone you trust. If you think that a friend or family member may be struggling with GAD, set aside a time to talk with them to express your concern and reassure them of your support.

Know When to Seek Help

If your anxiety, or the anxiety of a loved one, starts to cause problems in everyday life—such as at school, at work, or with friends and family—it's time to seek professional help. Talk to a health care provider about your mental health.

Are there clinical trials studying generalized anxiety disorder?

NIMH supports a wide range of research, including clinical trials that look at new ways to prevent, detect, or treat diseases and conditions—including GAD. Although individuals may benefit from being part of a clinical trial, participants should be aware that the primary purpose of a clinical trial is to gain new scientific knowledge so that others may be better helped in the future.

Researchers at NIMH and around the country conduct clinical trials with patients and healthy volunteers. Talk to a health care provider about clinical trials, their benefits and risks, and whether one is right for you. For more information, visit www.nimh.nih.gov/clinicaltrials.

Finding Help

Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator

This online resource, provided by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, helps you locate mental health treatment facilities and programs. Find a facility in your state at <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>. For additional resources, visit www.nimh.nih.gov/findhelp.

Talking to a Health Care Provider About Your Mental Health

Communicating well with a health care provider can improve your care and help you both make good choices about your health. Find tips to help prepare for and get the most out of your visit at www.nimh.nih.gov/talkingtips. For additional resources, including questions to ask a provider, visit the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality website at www.ahrq.gov/questions.

If you or someone you know is in immediate distress or is thinking about hurting themselves, call the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** toll-free at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). You also can text the **Crisis Text Line** (HELLO to 741741) or use the Lifeline Chat on the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline website at <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>.

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