

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a vague, uncomfortable feeling of fear, dread or danger from an unknown source.

For some it may be a one time episode; other people become constantly anxious about everything.



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Veterans & Veterans Families Counselling Service (VWCS)

Phone: 1800 011 046 – 24 hrs, 7 days



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NZ Freephone: 0800 4 838372

International: +0011 64 7 859 7676

8am-5pm Monday to Friday (NZ time)

# Anxiety disorder

A certain amount of anxiety is normal and helps improve performance and allows people to avoid dangerous situations. Several types of anxiety are recognised, including acute situational anxiety (which is usually short-term), generalised anxiety disorder, and adjustment disorder with anxious mood. Generalised anxiety is defined as unrealistic or excessive anxiety for six months or longer. Anxiety is a common mental health problem.

## \* Frequent signs and symptoms

- Feeling that something undesirable or harmful is about to happen
- Dry mouth, swallowing difficulty or hoarseness
- Rapid breathing and heartbeat
- Twitching or trembling
- Muscle tension, headaches
- Sweating
- Nausea, diarrhoea, weight loss
- Sleeplessness, nightmares
- Irritability
- Fatigue
- Memory problems
- Sexual impotence
- Dizziness or faintness

## \* Causes

Activation of the body's defence mechanisms for fight or flight. Excess adrenaline is discharged from the adrenal glands, and adrenaline breakdown products (catecholamines) eventually affect various parts of the body. An attempt to avoid the anxiety leads to more anxiety.

## \* Risk increases with

- Stress from any source (such as social or financial problems)
- Family history of anxiety
- Fatigue or overwork
- Recurrence of situations that have been previously stressful or harmful
- Medical illness
- Unrealistic perfectionism
- Withdrawal from drugs or alcohol

## \* Preventive measure

- Determine what stressful or potentially harmful situation is causing the anxiety. Deal directly with it
- Consider lifestyle changes to reduce stress
- Learn relaxation techniques

## \* Expected outcome

Generalised anxiety can be controlled with treatment. Overcoming anxiety often results in a richer, more satisfying life.

\* **Possible complications**

- Untreated anxiety may lead to neuroses, such as phobias, compulsions or hypochondriasis
- A sudden increase in anxiety may lead to panic and violent escape behaviour
- Anxiety is often associated with depression
- Dependence on drugs
- Heart arrhythmias

\* **Treatment/post procedure care, general measures**

- Some tests may be done to rule out medical conditions that produce anxiety, such as hyperthyroidism. Tests are usually normal
- Obtain counselling to understand the specific, but unconscious threat or source of stress
- Learn techniques, including biofeedback and relaxation therapy, to reduce muscle tension
- Follow a regular, energetic fitness routine using aerobic exercise

\* **Activity**

Stay active. Physical exertion helps reduce anxiety.

\* **Diet**

- No special diet
- Avoid caffeine and other stimulants
- Avoid alcohol

\* **Notify your doctor or talk to a counsellor if**

- You or a family member has symptoms of anxiety and self-treatment has failed
- You develop sudden feelings of panic
- New, unexplained symptoms develop. Drugs used in treatment may produce side effects

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