

# Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Excessive fear and worry are the hallmarks of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD). With GAD, worries are chronic and excessive, even when they relate to everyday events or minor matters. Nevertheless, the anxiety caused by these worries is very real and can be quite disabling. While people with GAD may not be consumed with worry all the time, their anxiety is almost always present and often leads to disturbing physical responses such as increased heart rate, nausea, dizziness, muscle tension, sweating and irritability. In severe cases, GAD can make it difficult to carry out even ordinary daily activities.

## What is GAD?

Generalized anxiety disorder is chronic and excessive worrying that never seems to go away and can affect men and women and typically is anxiety that focuses on many different events.

GAD tends to affect women more often than men. It can occur with other anxiety disorders, such as panic disorder or phobias, or by itself. But unlike those disorders, the anxiety of GAD doesn't focus on the fear of one particular event, such as an imminent panic attack. Instead, GAD anxiety focuses on many events.

Of all the anxiety disorders, GAD is the most difficult to diagnose. With panic disorder, or a specific phobia, the cause of the anxiety is obvious. But in GAD, there is no single source of fear. Furthermore, family members and even doctors often interpret GAD symptoms in terms of an individual personality (someone prone to

some worry or stress), rather than as signs of a serious though treatable problem. Because of this, many people with GAD remain undiagnosed, suffering needlessly despite the fact that effective help is readily available.

## Symptoms

Common symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) include:

- Chronic, excessive worry or irritability
- Frequent fatigue, restlessness or insomnia
- Trembling, heart palpitations or increased heart rate
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Cold, clammy hands or sweating
- Nausea, diarrhea
- Dry mouth
- Hot flashes or chills

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- Difficulty concentrating, or mind going blank
  - Muscle tension, aches, soreness

## Diagnosis

Since these symptoms can also indicate other anxiety disorders, health professionals must first rule out panic disorder, fear of having a serious illness (hypochondriasis), or fear of being embarrassed in public (social phobia) before diagnosing GAD. In addition, the symptoms must be present most days for at least six months for a diagnosis of GAD. A thorough medical evaluation is needed.

## Treatment

Some medical conditions (thyroid disorders, side effects from medication or excessive caffeine intake) can mimic the symptoms of GAD. Once medical conditions are excluded as the cause, psychotherapy can provide effective treatment.

Identifying an individual's sources of stress is the first step in treatment. Once the main sources of stress are identified, a therapist can suggest better techniques for handling stress and solving everyday problems.

Relaxation training, meditation and biofeedback are often used to help reduce the physical effects of anxiety. As these symptoms abate, the feeling of being in control starts to grow.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy techniques help a person understand how thoughts contribute to anxious feelings, and use this understanding to change problematic thoughts into more constructive and adaptive ones.

Medication, most commonly anti-anxiety drugs, such as benzodiazepine and its derivatives, also may be required in some cases. Some commonly prescribed anti-anxiety medications are diazepam (Valium), alprazolam (Xanax), and lorazepam (Ativan). Other medications prescribed include antidepressants and mild tranquilizers. Anti-anxiety medications or antidepressants are often taken for a short period to bring anxiety down to more a manageable level. After other anxiety-reducing techniques have been learned, the medications can usually be stopped.

## Learn more about generalized anxiety disorder

- **Anxiety and Depression Association of America**  
[www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)
- **Freedom From Fear**  
[www.freedomfromfear.org](http://www.freedomfromfear.org)

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