

Generalized anxiety disorder



What is generalized anxiety disorder?

Generalized anxiety disorder is persistent and excessive worry, fear and feeling of dread or nervousness about family, health, finances and work or school problems. Although occasional worry can be a normal part of life, people with this disorder can experience these feelings consistently for months or even years, in a way that interferes with their daily lives.

Generalized anxiety disorder develops slowly over time, usually occurring around age 30, although it can begin in childhood or adolescence.

Common signs and symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder

Marked symptoms of anxiety persist for at least several months. Generalized anxiety disorder is characterized mainly by either general apprehension or excessive worry. Not all individuals diagnosed with the disorder experience exactly the same symptoms, but symptoms may commonly include the following:

Physical

- insomnia, waking up frequently or having trouble staying asleep
- rapid heart rate
- being easily fatigued
- headaches, muscle aches, stomach aches or unexplained aches and pains
- swallowing difficulties
- tremors or twitching
- sweating or flushing
- lightheadedness or feeling out of breath
- digestive problems

Mental

- excessive worry about everyday events
- inability to control feelings of nervousness
- trouble concentrating
- restlessness and trouble relaxing
- being easily startled

Social

- irritability around others
- isolating oneself from social gatherings
- excessive worry around housing, finances, job security or performance or using transportation.

What causes generalized anxiety disorder?

Generalized anxiety disorder often develops when individuals have a hard time coping well with their stress. Experiencing a traumatic event or being in a stressful situation for too long has been shown to put people at a higher risk for the disorder. Research has shown that it can run in families, although not every family member will be affected.

Symptoms should be differentiated from similar symptoms due to other health conditions such as substance use, medications affecting the central nervous system or medical conditions such as hyperthyroidism.

When to seek help for generalized anxiety disorder

Worry and anxiety are a normal part of life, but if you are consistently anxious and are having trouble controlling your worry for more than a month, and this is causing problems with your daily schedule, work or relationships, you may be experiencing generalized anxiety disorder. Seeking help from a mental health professional can be beneficial. It is not uncommon for individuals diagnosed with the disorder to feel that they have been anxious and nervous all their lives.

Treating generalized anxiety disorder

Psychosocial interventions: Psychotherapy or “talking therapy” provided by a mental health professional can help relieve the symptoms.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT): CBT is a structured treatment that helps the individual to focus on their current difficulties while becoming aware of thoughts, feelings and behaviours that may trigger or keep their worry and anxiety constant.

Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT): ACT is a problem-focused intervention for treating generalized anxiety disorder, helping the individual to better manage their struggle to control uncomfortable thoughts or sensations, while increasing activities that align with their

life goals. Individuals are encouraged to accept their feelings without fighting them, eventually leading to a reduction in the anxieties that affect their lives.

How can you help yourself if you are experiencing generalized anxiety disorder?

Treatment usually requires the guidance and care of a mental health professional, but there are several approaches that a person can take to reduce their worry and anxiety on their own, including the following:

- **Healthy diet.** Worry and anxiety can take a toll on your physical health. Eating a balanced, healthy diet rich in whole grains, vegetables and fruits can help keep your body healthy during times of stress.
- **Meditation.** Starting a meditation practice can help reduce anxiety. Mindfulness meditation is one technique that helps you to become aware of your thoughts and feelings without judging them, allowing them to come and go.
- **Relaxation techniques.** Muscular relaxation/ breathing techniques, as well as physical exercise, can all help in reducing the stress and muscle tension commonly associated with generalized anxiety disorder.

How can you help a friend or family member who is experiencing generalized anxiety disorder?

If a family member or friend is suffering with the symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder, it can often be difficult to know how to help. Anxiety and worry are not always easy to see or understand, unlike a physical illness, so it's important to be sensitive to the person's needs, even if they may not make complete sense to you.

Actively listening and allowing them to tell you their worries and fears can help you understand what they are going through and may also help reduce their anxiety and worry. Do not force them to have a conversation about their anxiety; instead, let them know you are there for them if they need to talk. If necessary, guide them to seek professional help or support from a mental health professional.

Resources

Mental health and psychosocial support

Treatments for generalized anxiety disorder

Personal stories of grief and anxiety

How to help someone with anxiety

Healthy diet

Yoga for stress relief

Mental health professionals by country

This is one of a series of factsheets produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean to give the general public more information about mental disorders and how they can be treated. You can download all the factsheets free of charge from the Regional Office's website at: <https://www.emro.who.int/mnh/publications/mental-health-disorders.html>.