



Aging Adults and Anxiety

What You Need to Know





You are Not Alone

Anxiety is a common feeling. Almost everyone has felt it at one time or another, but those who suffer from anxiety disorders or prolonged anxiety episodes understand how debilitating it can be. An estimated 40 million American adults suffer from anxiety disorders. Anxiety disorders are serious medical illnesses that involve excessive, irrational fear. They are chronic and can worsen if left untreated.

While they occur throughout the lifespan, there are important differences in anxiety disorders occurring in the older population. Recent studies have found that one in five older adults, ages 55 to 85 years, report significant symptoms of anxiety that require treatment. Anxiety can occur along with other psychiatric problems too; over half of elderly persons with severe depression also meet the criteria for having an anxiety disorder.

Anxiety disorders in aging adults have been underestimated, in part, because older patients are more likely to emphasize their physical complaints and downplay emotional problems. However, aging adults are more susceptible to anxiety since they are at the phase of life where they experience weakening health conditions, financial concerns, and loneliness.





Everyday Anxiety or an Anxiety Disorder?

Everyday Anxiety	Anxiety Disorder
Worry about paying bills, health concerns, a romantic breakup, or other important life events	Constant and unsubstantiated worry that causes significant distress and interferes with daily life
Embarrassment or self-consciousness in an uncomfortable or awkward social situation	Avoiding social situations for fear of being judged, embarrassed, or humiliated
A case of nerves or sweating before a significant event	Seemingly out-of-the-blue panic attacks and the preoccupation with the fear of having another one
Realistic fear of a dangerous object, place, or situation	Irrational fear or avoidance of an object, place, or situation that poses little or no threat of danger
Making sure that you are healthy and living in a safe, hazard-free environment	Performing uncontrollable, repetitive actions, such as excessive cleaning or checking, or touching and arranging
Anxiety, sadness, or difficulty sleeping immediately after a traumatic event	Recurring nightmares, flashbacks, or emotional numbing related to a traumatic event that occurred several months or years before



What are Anxiety Disorders?

An anxiety disorder is a psychiatric condition where people develop excessive levels of anxiety about certain objects, situations, or experiences. There are different types and degrees of anxiety disorders, which include: generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social anxiety disorder (also called social phobia), and specific phobias. Despite their different forms, all anxiety disorders share one major symptom: persistent or severe fear or worry in situations where most people wouldn't feel threatened. In addition to the primary symptoms of irrational and excessive fear and worry, other common symptoms of anxiety include the following emotional symptoms:

- Feelings of apprehension or dread
- Trouble concentrating; short-term memory loss
- Anticipating the worst
- Irritability; anger
- Restlessness
- Always watching for signs of danger
- Feeling like your mind has gone blank
- Depression
- Constant feeling of being overwhelmed

- Dramatic mood swings
- Things are scary; frightening
- Feeling like things are unreal or dreamlike
- Feel like crying for no apparent reason
- Not feeling like yourself; detached from loved ones, emotionally numb
- Feeling like you are under pressure all the time
- Fearful of going crazy; of dying; of impending doom; of making mistakes; of normal things

Anxiety is more than just a feeling. As a product of the body's fight-or-flight response, anxiety involves a wide range of physical symptoms. Because of the numerous physical symptoms, anxiety sufferers often mistake their disorder for a medical illness. They may visit many doctors and make numerous trips to the hospital before their anxiety disorder is discovered.

The following are some common physical symptoms of anxiety:

- Pounding heart – feels like you are having a heart attack
- Sweating
- Stomach or bowel upset
- Frequent urination or diarrhea
- Shortness of breath
- Dry mouth
- Tremors and twitches
- Feeling shaky, keyed up, or on edge
- Muscle tension and soreness
- Feeling dizzy or lightheaded
- Headaches
- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- Skin sensitivity (numbness, tingling, rashes)
- Feeling chilled
- Restlessness



Common Sources of Anxiety in Aging Adults

Aging adults must deal with significant changes, threats to their independent functioning, and major losses, at a time in their lives when they are often least equipped to deal with them. It is not surprising that this often leads to anxiety. Below are some of the most common sources of anxiety reported by aging adults.

The Fear of Forgetting

The possibility of forgetting a lifetime of memories often times leaves elderly men and women feeling vulnerable and unsure of themselves. Everyone, old and young alike, have forgetful moments. Keys go missing and shoes are misplaced. But for aging adults, a forgetful moment reminds them that it can easily lead to another, and then another, until larger pieces of the puzzle begin to go missing. This fear leaves many feeling anxious and on edge.

Large Crowds of People

Large crowds can be overwhelming to an elderly person, especially those who are frail and in poor health. All it takes is one bump or accidental shove to cause severe damage. A fall can easily result in a broken hip, or worse.

Being Home Alone

This is particularly true for individuals who live alone and have no one to help with daily activities and chores. The number of emergency call buttons that are now being produced are proof that slips and falls are a common occurrence among the elderly. While there may be a number of new ways to obtain help in such a situation, this doesn't eliminate the fear that a fall or accident while alone will happen.

Financial Concerns

Living within a fixed budget can become overwhelming, especially with the cost of living skyrocketing and medical bills piling up. Aging adults may not have the option to go back to work in order to make ends meet. The idea of having to rely on friends and families, or even worse, not having a way to pay for living expenses, can produce a lot of fear and worry.

Health Concerns/Losing Independence

As adults age, they become more and more dependent on the help of others, and this can be a difficult transition to accept. Driving becomes more difficult and often times impossible, and for those living in nursing homes or assisted living, even everyday tasks may require assistance. Many aging adults will adamantly deny their loss of self-reliance as they struggle to accept the changes taking place in this phase of their lives.



Treatment of Anxiety Disorders

Only about one-third of those suffering from an anxiety disorder receive treatment, even though the disorders are highly treatable. Anxiety disorders are not all treated the same, so it is important to determine the specific problem first. Generally, anxiety disorders are treated by a combination of medication and behavior therapy. Fortunately, there are many good treatments for anxiety disorders. These may include the use of relaxation techniques, psychotherapy and anti-anxiety medications. Certain antidepressants are very effective for treating anxiety without the risk of addiction or falls. Very often, with effective treatment, the person can then handle the challenges of his or her life. Although medications won't cure an anxiety disorder, they can keep the symptoms under control and enable people to lead normal lives.

If you believe you have an anxiety disorder, it is always good to start with your primary care doctor. You will already have a relationship with him or her and will feel more comfortable opening up to someone you know and trust. Tell your doctor what symptoms you have, and be prepared to be referred to a mental health specialist for treatment and follow-up. Many aging adults still equate psychiatry with "being crazy," and therefore, tend to be very resistant to seeking psychiatric treatment for anxiety. It is important, however, to remember that these disorders can be treated successfully.



How do I get help?

Please contact us at:

702-364-1484 or toll-free
1-800-873-2246, TTY **711**

Do you have questions for your doctor? Would you like to talk to your doctor about your questions? Write them down here. Please use additional paper if necessary.

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