

Patients - Anxiety

Anxiety | Information for Parents

What is anxiety?

There are many different types of anxiety. Physical sensations, like racing heart, muscle tension or shortness of breath, can sometimes be a sign of anxiety. Worrying and avoiding things are symptoms, too. Anxiety can serve a purpose. For example, it can make us avoid dangerous situations. However, anxiety becomes problematic when it impacts daily life.

Anxiety can occur before, during, or after pregnancy. Some different types of anxiety include:

- **Generalized Anxiety Disorder:** Features include worrying too much about ordinary situations, sleep disturbance, irritability, and muscle tension.
- **Social Anxiety Disorder:** The main feature is feeling uncomfortable when around others.
- **Panic Disorder:** Is notable for episodes that come seemingly from nowhere. Episodes are brief. You may feel as if you are losing your mind, having a heart attack, or dying.
- **Agoraphobia:** You may feel unsafe being in certain places or situations. In the most severe cases, you are unwilling to leave your home.
- **Phobia:** Phobias are usually very specific. Common phobias include fear of heights, spiders, blood, and closed spaces. People who suffer from phobias avoid specific things.

What does anxiety feel like?

Anxiety disorders have various symptoms and presentations. However, the one feature that all types of anxiety share is a sense of fear and discomfort. Physical feelings are commonly felt as well. If you are anxious, you might feel some of the following:

- Nervousness
- Chest tightness
- Insomnia
- Sense of danger, panic, doom
- Hyperventilation
- Nausea or diarrhea
- Tachycardia (rapid heart rate)
- Tremors
- Poor concentration

Example 1: Jan is pregnant for her first time. She and her partner have spent a large amount of time and money becoming pregnant. Since learning she was expecting, she can't sleep. She thinks of all the things that could go wrong with the pregnancy. She does not have morning sickness, yet she has lost two pounds in the 18

weeks of her pregnancy. She calls the nursing line nearly daily. She asks if her symptoms are normal. She worries the baby is not growing, and insists on weekly ultrasounds.

Example 2: Quinn is a 40-year-old woman, pregnant for the fourth time. She has had three trips to the emergency room in one month. Quinn reports she was fine until “out of nowhere” racing heart and heavy breathing started. Quinn is convinced that she was having a heart attack. Quinn worries there will soon be another episode and fears the next one may be deadly, even though her doctors have reassured her.

Medication treatments

There are medications that can help someone with an anxiety disorder. Some of them have been approved for anxiety by the Food and Drug Administration. Among the medications that physicians are comfortable using in their pregnant or lactating patients are buspirone, fluoxetine, and sertraline.

Benzodiazepines (like alprazolam or clonazepam) are not a good treatment for anxiety in the long term. There is no evidence that these medications are a better treatment for anxiety compared with other medications. Of greater concern, benzodiazepines can be addictive. They also cause falls and motor vehicle accidents.

Other medicines like fluoxetine or sertraline are better long-term solutions. Under the care of a physician, your anxiety can be well-controlled. A combination of specific medications, therapy, and lifestyle changes can lessen your symptoms and improve your life.

Non-medication treatments

There are treatments for anxiety that do not include medication. Relaxation and breathing training, meditation, and psychotherapy (cognitive behavioral therapy or psychodynamic psychotherapy) can be very helpful. Ask your doctor for information about these options.