**The effects of anxiety on the body**

Anxiety is a normal part of life. For example, you may have felt anxiety before addressing a group or in a job interview.

In the short term, anxiety increases your breathing and heart rate, concentrating blood flow to your brain, where you need it. This very physical response is preparing you to face an intense situation.

If it gets too intense, however, you might start to feel lightheaded and nauseous. An excessive or persistent state of anxiety can have a devastating effect on your physical and mental health.

Anxiety disorders can happen at any stage of life, but they usually begin by middle age. Women are more likely to have an anxiety disorder than men, says the [National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)](https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/anxiety-disorders/index.shtml).

Stressful life experiences may increase your risk for an anxiety disorder, too. Symptoms may begin immediately or years later. Having a serious medical condition or a substance use disorder can also lead to an anxiety disorder.

There are several types of anxiety disorders. They include:

**Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)**

GAD is marked by excessive anxiety for no logical reason. The Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA) estimates GAD affects about [6.8 million](https://www.adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/generalized-anxiety-disorder-gad) American adults a year.

GAD is diagnosed when extreme worry about a variety of things lasts six months or longer. If you have a mild case, you’re probably able to complete your normal day-to-day activities. More severe cases may have a profound impact on your life.

**Social anxiety disorder**

This disorder involves a paralyzing fear of social situations and of being judged or humiliated by others. This severe social phobia can leave one feeling ashamed and alone.

About [15 million](https://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/social-anxiety-disorder) American adults live with social anxiety disorder, notes the ADAA. The typical age at onset is around 13. More than one-third of people with social anxiety disorder wait a decade or more before pursuing help.

**Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**

PTSD develops after witnessing or experiencing something traumatic. Symptoms can begin immediately or be delayed for years. Common causes include war, natural disasters, or a physical attack. PTSD episodes may be triggered without warning.

**Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)**

People with OCD may feel overwhelmed with the desire to perform particular rituals (compulsions) over and over again, or experience intrusive and unwanted thoughts that can be distressing (obsessions).

Common compulsions include habitual hand-washing, counting, or checking something. Common obsessions include concerns about cleanliness, aggressive impulses, and need for symmetry.

**Phobias**

These include fear of tight spaces (claustrophobia), fear of heights (acrophobia), and many others. You may have a powerful urge to avoid the feared object or situation.

**Panic disorder**

This causes panic attacks, spontaneous feelings of anxiety, terror, or impending doom. Physical symptoms include heart palpitations, chest pain, and shortness of breath.

These attacks may occur at any time. You can also have another type of anxiety disorder along with panic disorder.

**Central nervous system**

Long-term anxiety and panic attacks can cause your brain to release stress hormones on a regular basis. This can increase the frequency of symptoms such as headaches, dizziness, and depression.

When you feel anxious and stressed, your brain floods your nervous system with hormones and chemicals designed to help you respond to a threat. Adrenaline and cortisol are two examples.

While helpful for the occasional high-stress event, long-term exposure to stress hormones can be more harmful to your physical health in the long run. For example, long-term exposure to cortisol can contribute to weight gain.

**Cardiovascular system**

Anxiety disorders can cause rapid heart rate, palpitations, and chest pain. You may also be at an increased risk of high blood pressure and heart disease. If you already have heart disease, anxiety disorders may raise the risk of coronary events.

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**Excretory and digestive systems**

Anxiety also affects your excretory and digestive systems. You may have stomachaches, nausea, diarrhea, and other digestive issues. Loss of appetite can also occur.

There may be a connection between anxiety disorders and the development of irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) after a bowel infection. IBS can cause vomiting, diarrhea, or constipation.

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**Immune system**

Anxiety can trigger your flight-or-fight stress response and release a flood of chemicals and hormones, like adrenaline, into your system.

In the short term, this increases your pulse and breathing rate, so your brain can get more oxygen. This prepares you to respond appropriately to an intense situation. Your immune system may even get a brief boost. With occasional stress, your body returns to normal functioning when the stress passes.

But if you repeatedly feel anxious and stressed or it lasts a long time, your body never gets the signal to return to normal functioning. This can weaken your immune system, leaving you more vulnerable to viral infections and frequent illnesses. Also, your regular vaccines may not work as well if you have anxiety.

**Respiratory system**

Anxiety causes rapid, shallow breathing. If you have chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), you may be at an increased risk of hospitalization from anxiety-related complications. Anxiety can also make asthma symptoms worse.

**Other effects**

Anxiety disorder can cause other symptoms, including:

* headaches
* muscle tension
* insomnia
* depression
* social isolation

If you have PTSD, you may experience flashbacks, reliving a traumatic experience over and over. You might get angry or startle easily, and perhaps become emotionally withdrawn. Other symptoms include nightmares, insomnia, and sadness.