

# Anxiety in Older Adults

Have you ever suffered from excessive nervousness, fear or worrying? Do you sometimes experience chest pains, headaches, sweating, or gastrointestinal problems? You may be experiencing symptoms of anxiety.

Excessive anxiety that causes distress or that interferes with daily activities is not a normal part of aging, and can lead to a variety of health problems and decreased functioning in everyday life. Between 3% and 14% of older adults meet the criteria for a diagnosable anxiety disorder, and a recent study from the International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry found that more than 27% of older adults under the care of an aging service provider have symptoms of anxiety that may not amount to diagnosis of a disorder, but significantly impact their functioning.

The most common anxiety disorders include specific phobias and generalized anxiety disorder. Social phobia, obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are less common.

## Common Types of Anxiety Disorders and Their Symptoms

**Panic Disorder:** Characterized by panic attacks, or sudden feelings of terror that strike repeatedly and without warning. Physical symptoms include chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, abdominal discomfort, and fear of dying.

**Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder:** People with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) suffer from recurrent unwanted thoughts (obsessions) or rituals (compulsions), which they feel they cannot control. Rituals, such as hand washing, counting, checking or cleaning, are often performed in hope of preventing obsessive thoughts or making them go away.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder:** PTSD is characterized by persistent symptoms that occur after experiencing a traumatic event such as violence, abuse, natural disasters, or some other threat to a person's sense of survival or safety. Common symptoms include nightmares, flashbacks, numbing of emotions, depression, being easily startled, and feeling angry, irritable or distracted.

**Phobia:** An extreme, disabling and irrational fear of something that really poses little or no actual danger; the fear leads to avoidance of objects or situations and can cause people to limit their lives. Common phobias include agoraphobia (fear of the outside world); social phobia; fear of certain animals; driving a car; heights, tunnels or bridges; thunderstorms; and flying.

**Generalized Anxiety Disorder:** Chronic, exaggerated worry about everyday routine life events and activities, lasting at least six months; almost always anticipating the worst even though there is little reason to expect it. Accompanied by physical symptoms, such as fatigue, trembling, muscle tension, headache, or nausea.

## Identifying Risk Factors for Anxiety

Like depression, anxiety disorders are often unrecognized and undertreated in older adults. Anxiety can worsen an older adult's physical health, decrease their ability to perform daily activities, and decrease feelings of well-being.



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## Check for Risk Factors

Anxiety in older adults may be linked to several important risk factors. These include, among others:

- Chronic medical conditions (especially chronic obstructive pulmonary disease [COPD], cardiovascular disease including arrhythmias and angina, thyroid disease, and diabetes)
- Overall feelings of poor health
- Sleep disturbance
- Side effects of medications (i.e. steroids, antidepressants, stimulants, bronchodilators/inhalers, etc.)
- Alcohol or prescription medication misuse or abuse
- Physical limitations in daily activities
- Stressful life events
- Negative or difficult events in childhood
- Excessive worry or preoccupation with physical health symptoms

## Depression and Anxiety

Older adults with mixed anxiety and depression often have more severe symptoms of both depression and anxiety.

## Treatment Options

The most common and effective treatment for anxiety is a combination of therapy and medication, but some people may benefit from just one form of treatment. If you or someone you know is experiencing symptoms of any form of anxiety, you should seek professional help immediately.

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