

Introduction

Social anxiety disorder, also known as social phobia or SAD for short, is a type of anxiety disorder. People with SAD have a strong fear of being judged by others and of being embarrassed. People with SAD are afraid of doing common things in front of other people. Sometimes, they stay away from places or events where they think they might have to do something that will embarrass them.



This reference summary will help you understand social anxiety disorder. It discusses the symptoms, causes, diagnosis and treatment of SAD.

Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD)

Social anxiety disorder is sometimes called social phobia. It is a strong fear of being judged by others and of being embarrassed. This fear can be so strong that it gets in the way of doing everyday activities, such as going to work or school.

Everyone has felt anxious or embarrassed at one time or another. For example, meeting new people or giving a public speech can make anyone nervous. But people with social anxiety disorder worry about these and other things for weeks before they happen and have an exaggerated fear or anxiety.

People with SAD are afraid of doing common things in front of other people. Most people who have social anxiety disorder know that they shouldn't be as afraid as they are. But people with SAD can't control their fear.



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Some people with SAD have social anxiety only in certain situations. For example, a person may only feel anxious about interacting with people at work. But other people have anxiety in almost every social situation.

Social anxiety disorder usually starts during youth. A healthcare provider can tell that a person has SAD if the person has had symptoms for at least 6 months. Without treatment, SAD can last for many years or even a lifetime.

Symptoms

Social anxiety disorder affects your thoughts and emotions. If you have SAD, you may:

- Be very self-conscious or embarrassed in front of other people.
- Be frightened that other people will judge you.
- Worry for days or weeks before a social event.

SAD also affects your behavior. So if you have SAD, you may:

- Stay away from places where there are other people.
- Have a hard time making and keeping friends.
- Have difficulty making eye contact.
- Have difficulty talking in front of other people.

Social anxiety disorder can also cause physical symptoms. If you have SAD, you may:

- Blush, sweat or tremble around other people.
- Feel nauseous or sick to your stomach when with other people.
- Have a fast heartbeat, shaky voice, or muscle tension when with other people.

The symptoms of SAD may change over time. Symptoms often develop during demanding situations or times of intense stress.



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People with social anxiety disorder often recognize that their fear is unreasonable. But they may have become so worried about developing symptoms that they avoid situations that might trigger them. Over time, this becomes a harmful cycle that decreases their quality of life. If you experience symptoms of SAD, talk to your health care provider. The condition can get worse if left untreated, so it is important to seek help as soon as possible.

Causes

The exact cause of social anxiety disorder is unknown. But there are some things that people with SAD have in common.

SAD sometimes runs in families. No one knows for sure why some family members have it while others do not. More research is needed to understand this.

Researchers have found that several parts of the brain are involved in fear and anxiety. By learning more about fear and anxiety in the brain, scientists may be able to understand what causes social anxiety disorder and create better treatments.

Researchers are also looking for ways in which stress and environmental factors may play a role in the development of social anxiety disorder. It is possible that SAD is the result of negative or traumatic life experiences such as childhood teasing, bullying or humiliation.



Risk Factors

Although the exact cause of social anxiety disorder is unknown, there are some risk factors associated with the condition. Risk factors are things that can increase your chance of developing a certain medical condition.

SAD is often first triggered as the result of new social or work demands. Going out on a date, giving a public speech or delivering an important work presentation are some of the demands that may put a person at risk for developing SAD.

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There also appears to be a link between social anxiety disorder and environment.

Children of overly anxious parents tend to develop SAD more than people who were not exposed to social anxiety as children. Being regularly exposed to anxious personalities may be a risk factor for SAD. Being raised by a controlling or a very protective parent may also increase the risk of social anxiety disorder.



Age is a risk factor for SAD. Social anxiety disorder usually develops before age 25.

Gender may be a risk factor for SAD. Females appear to be more likely to have SAD than males. But it is possible that males are less likely to report health problems related to their emotions.

Having an obvious health condition may be a risk factor for social anxiety disorder. People that are visibly disfigured, have a stutter, or have some other health condition that is easily noticeable have an increased risk of developing SAD over time.

Diagnosis

If you believe that you have SAD, help is available. Your primary health care provider is the first person you should talk to when seeking treatment for social anxiety disorder. Your health care provider will do an exam to make sure that a physical problem isn't causing the symptoms. This may include a blood test. If he or she believes that you do have SAD, you may be referred to a mental health specialist.

Diagnosis of social anxiety disorder is based on a clinical interview. Your health care provider will ask you questions. He or she will use certain guidelines to decide if your symptoms are caused by SAD or some other medical condition.



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To be diagnosed with SAD, your symptoms must fit a very specific set of guidelines. These include:

- An ongoing, intense fear of social situations.
- Severe anxiety caused by social situations.

Other symptoms used to diagnose SAD include:

- You recognize that the anxiety you feel is excessive or unreasonable.
- You avoid social situations that may produce anxiety.
- Your anxiety interferes with daily living.

In children and teens, SAD will only be suspected if symptoms have been present for six months or more. But children may not recognize that their fear is excessive or unreasonable. This is because children often lack the ability to recognize which emotions are normal and which are unreasonable.

Treatment

Social anxiety disorder is unlikely to get better without treatment. For SAD, the goal of treatment is to lessen your anxiety and help you better control your reaction when you think about or are involved in social situations.

SAD is generally treated with psychotherapy, medication or both. Psychotherapy is sometimes called talk therapy. Talk therapy includes discussion, listening and counseling.

A type of psychotherapy called cognitive behavior therapy is especially useful for treating SAD. It teaches different ways of thinking, behaving and reacting to situations that help a person feel less anxious and fearful. It can also help people learn and practice social skills.



A health care provider also may prescribe medication to help treat SAD. The most commonly prescribed medications for SAD are anti-anxiety medications and antidepressants.

Anti-anxiety medications are powerful and there are different types. Many types begin working right away. But they generally should not be taken for long periods.

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Antidepressants are used to treat depression. But they are also helpful for social anxiety disorder. They are probably more commonly prescribed for SAD than anti-anxiety medications. Antidepressants may take several weeks to start working.

It is important to know that although antidepressants can be safe and effective for many people, they may be risky for some, especially children, teens and young adults. Antidepressants may cause some people to have suicidal thoughts or make suicide attempts. Anyone taking antidepressants should be closely monitored, especially when they first start treatment with medications.



Another type of medication called beta-blockers can help control some of the physical symptoms of SAD such as excessive sweating, shaking or a racing heart.

Beta-blockers are most commonly prescribed when the symptoms of SAD happen in specific situations, such as when a person must speak or perform in front of a group of people.

All medications carry the risk of side effects. Talk to your healthcare provider about any side effects you may have. It is also important that you never start or stop a medication without first talking to your health care provider. Suddenly starting or stopping a medication may cause more problems in the long run.

Some people do better with cognitive behavior therapy, while others do better with medication. Still others do best with a combination of the two. Talk with your health care provider about the best treatment for you.



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Summary

Social anxiety disorder, also known as social phobia or SAD for short, is a type of anxiety disorder. People with SAD have a strong fear of being judged by others and of being embarrassed.

The exact cause of SAD is unknown. It may be related to certain chemicals in the brain, genetics or traumatic experiences.

Your primary health care provider is the first person you should talk to when seeking treatment for SAD. He or she will likely refer you to a mental health care provider if SAD is suspected.

SAD is diagnosed by a clinical interview. Your health care provider will ask you questions and use specific guidelines to determine whether your symptoms are caused by SAD or some other medical condition.

Treatment helps most people with SAD. Treatment options include therapy, medicines or both.



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