

## ***Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)***

### **Introduction**

Generalized anxiety disorder, also known as GAD, is a pattern of frequent, constant worry and anxiety that interferes with daily functioning. People with GAD worry constantly and experience anxiety that is not related to a specific event or situation.

Generalized anxiety disorder can be a long-term challenge. The constant feeling of worry affects relationships, job performance and self-confidence. But GAD can improve if it is recognized and treated.

This reference summary reviews the diagnosis and treatment of generalized anxiety disorder. Information about the causes and risk factors associated with GAD are also included.



### **Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)**

All of us worry about things like health, money or family problems. But people with GAD are extremely worried about these and many other things. People with GAD worry even when there is little or no reason to. Generalized anxiety disorder is different than the anxiety we all feel from time to time.

People with GAD:

- Feel anxious about common things or events.
- Have difficulty controlling their anxiety.
- Experience excessive anxiety.
- Have anxiety that lasts at least 6 months.

People with GAD are very anxious about just getting through the day. They think things will always go badly. At times, worrying keeps people with GAD from doing everyday tasks.

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GAD is difficult to diagnose. Its symptoms are similar to the symptoms of many other physical and mental conditions. It may take a health care provider some time to be sure that a person has GAD instead of something else.

Living with GAD can be an ongoing challenge. It often develops along with other anxiety or mood disorders. But GAD usually improves after it has been diagnosed and treated.

## Symptoms

It is normal to feel worried from time to time. But if your anxiety never seems to go away, or if it seems unreasonably intense, it may be time to see a health care provider.

Generalized anxiety disorder develops slowly. It often starts during the teen years or young adulthood. Symptoms may get better or worse at different times, and often are worse during times of stress.

A person with GAD may:

- Excessively worry about everyday things.
- Have trouble controlling their constant worries.
- Know that they worry much more than they should.
- Have trouble relaxing.
- Have trouble concentrating.
- Be easily startled.
- Have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.



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A person with GAD may also:

- Feel ongoing exhaustion.
- Have headaches, muscle aches, stomach aches, or unexplained pains.
- Have difficulty swallowing.
- Tremble or twitch.
- Be irritable, sweat a lot, and feel light-headed or out of breath.
- Have to go to the bathroom a lot.

You should see a health care provider if you believe you are worrying more often than you should. It may be time to get help if your anxiety is causing problems at work, in your relationships or in other aspects of your life.

Many of the symptoms of GAD are similar to the symptoms of other physical and mental conditions. This can make GAD difficult to diagnose. It may take several visits to your health care provider before you are diagnosed with GAD.

If left untreated, your anxiety may get worse over time. It is important to seek professional help before your anxiety becomes severe.

People who are suffering from anxiety but are not receiving treatment might think that things are never going to get better. If you or someone you know is suicidal, seek medical treatment immediately. Help is available.



## **Causes**

The exact causes of generalized anxiety disorder are not fully understood. It is likely that GAD has many causes.

The causes of GAD may include genetics, life experiences and stress factors. It is possible that chemicals in the brain are involved. But more research needs to be done before these and other causes are fully understood.

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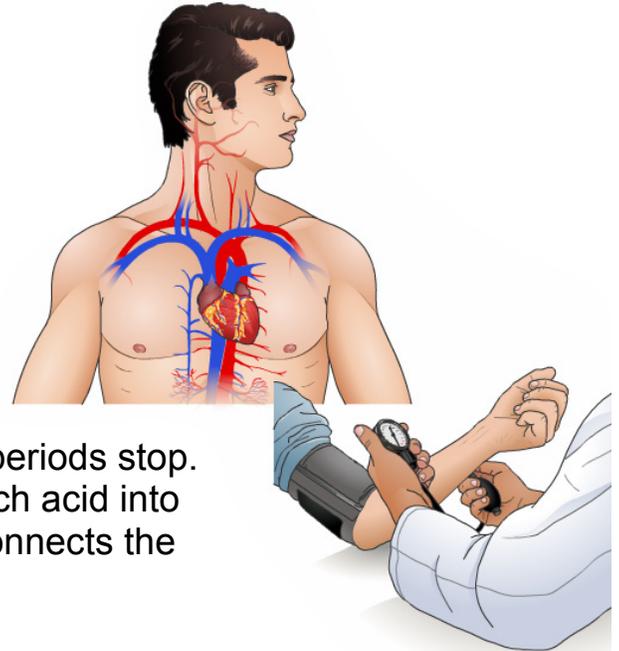
One thing that researchers have discovered is that GAD sometimes runs in families. But no one knows for sure why some family members have it, while others do not.

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 create better treatments. Researchers are also looking to see what role stress and environmental factors may play.

We also know that certain physical health conditions are associated with anxiety. These include:

- Menopause.
- Heart disease.
- Low or high blood pressure.
- Gastroesophageal reflux disease.

Menopause is the time of life when a woman's ovaries stop producing hormones and menstrual periods stop. Gastroesophageal reflux is the backflow of stomach acid into the esophagus. The esophagus is the tube that connects the mouth to the stomach.



## **Risk Factors**

A risk factor is something that increases your chance of developing a specific medical condition. Having a risk factor does not necessarily mean you will develop GAD. The following sections review some of the risk factors for generalized anxiety disorder.

Being female may increase your risk for GAD. Women are twice as likely to be diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder as men.

If you suffered a childhood trauma, your risk of developing GAD is increased. Children who experienced abuse or trauma, even as a witness, have a higher risk of developing generalized anxiety disorder later in life.

Having a chronic or ongoing health condition or serious illness, such as heart disease, increases your risk for developing GAD. Chronic health conditions may cause you to constantly worry about the future, your treatment and your finances.

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If you regularly suffer from stress, you have an increased risk for developing GAD. Stressful life situations may cause frequent, overwhelming anxiety.

Your personality may also be a risk factor. Some personality types make people more likely to develop an anxiety disorder. Some personality disorders, such as obsessive-compulsive personality disorder, are also linked to generalized anxiety disorder.

The genes you inherited from your parents may increase your risk for developing GAD. Generalized anxiety disorder may run in families. This makes genetics a risk factor.



If you regularly use drugs or alcohol, you have a greater risk for developing GAD. Also, drug or alcohol abuse can make the symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder worse. Caffeine, nicotine and other stimulants can also increase anxiety.

## Diagnosis

A diagnosis for GAD requires a number of steps. Your health care provider may begin by asking you detailed questions about your symptoms and medical history. He or she may also do a physical examination to look for signs that your anxiety may be caused by another medical condition.

Generalized anxiety disorder is a diagnosis of exclusion. This means that GAD is only considered after other sources for the anxiety have been ruled out.

The following sections review the criteria that must be met to receive a diagnosis of GAD:

You are excessively anxious and worried about several events or activities. You find it difficult to control these feelings. You have felt this way most days of the week, for at least six months.



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Your feelings of worry cause you distress or interfere with your daily life.

Your anxiety isn't related to another mental health condition. Other mental health conditions include:

- Panic attacks.
- Substance abuse.
- Post-traumatic stress disorder.

You experience at least three of the following symptoms:

- Trouble concentrating.
- Irritability.
- Restlessness.
- Fatigue.
- Difficulty sleeping.
- Muscle tension.

Children only need to experience one of these conditions, in addition to the other criteria, to receive a diagnosis of GAD.

Generalized anxiety disorder usually develops along with other mental health problems. This makes diagnosis and treatment more difficult. Some disorders that are linked to generalized anxiety disorder include:

- Panic disorder.
- Depression.
- Phobias.
- Substance abuse.
- Post-traumatic stress disorder.



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If your health care provider suspects that your anxiety is caused by another medical condition, other tests may be required. He or she may order a blood or urine test, or other tests to look for signs of a physical problem.

## Treatment

After you have been diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder, your health care provider may refer you to a mental health specialist to receive treatment.

GAD is most often treated with psychotherapy, medication or both. Psychotherapy is also known as talk therapy. It involves discussion, listening and counseling. It is used to treat different mental, emotional, personality and behavior disorders.

Cognitive behavior therapy is a type of psychotherapy. It is useful for treating GAD. It teaches a person different ways of thinking, behaving, and reacting to situations. These skills can help a person feel less anxious and worried.

Health care providers may also prescribe medication to help treat GAD.

You can talk to your health care provider about the different types of medication that are available to treat anxiety. He or she can help you decide if medication is needed, and if so, what kind of medication will work best for you.



The treatment for generalized anxiety disorder depends on the person. Some people do better with cognitive behavior therapy. Others do better with medication. Some people do best with a combination of the two. Talk with your health care provider about the best treatment for you.

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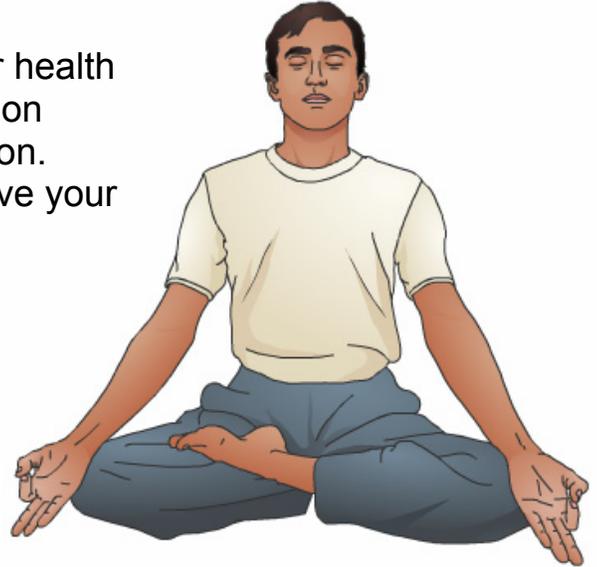
## Lifestyle Changes

Some people experience relief from their GAD symptoms by making changes to their lifestyle.

Not getting enough sleep can make you feel anxious. You should do what you can to make sure you are getting enough quality sleep. Talk to your health care provider if you have trouble sleeping.

If you have trouble relaxing, you should talk to your health care provider about relaxation techniques. Relaxation techniques include activities like yoga and meditation. These activities can help relieve anxiety and improve your ability to focus on a task.

A healthy diet may provide some relief from your anxiety. What you eat plays an important role in how you feel. In general, you should avoid eating processed foods or foods that are fatty or sugary. Instead, eat foods that are rich in B vitamins and omega-3 fatty acids.



B vitamins are a group of vitamins and nutrients that the body needs to get or make energy from the food you eat. B vitamins are found naturally in:

- Yeast.
- Seeds.
- Meat and eggs.
- Liver.
- Vegetables.

Omega-3 fatty acids are a type of fat obtained in the diet that plays an important role in your immune system. These fatty acids can be found in certain types of fish.

Daily exercise also may decrease your GAD symptoms. Exercise is a great way to reduce stress. It can lift your mood while making you more physically healthy. Be sure to start slowly and gradual increase the amount and intensity of the exercise.

If you use drugs or alcohol, you should stop. These substances may seem to give you temporary relief from your symptoms. But over time they make the condition worse.

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Support groups are also available for people with anxiety. These groups include people who have a similar condition. Attending a support group may help you understand your condition better. You can learn how other people with anxiety disorders find healthy relief from their symptoms.

Lifestyle changes are not a substitute for the treatment your health care provider recommends. You should never start or stop a treatment without the approval of your health care provider.

## Summary

Generalized anxiety disorder, or GAD, is an ongoing condition. People with GAD experience anxiety that is not related to a specific event or situation. They respond to everyday problems with more anxiety than is expected.

GAD develops slowly. It often starts during the teen years or young adulthood. Symptoms may get better or worse at different times, and often are worse during times of stress.

The exact cause of GAD is unknown. It is likely that GAD has many causes. These causes may include genetics, life experiences and stress factors.

GAD is difficult to diagnose. The symptoms of GAD are similar to the symptoms of many other physical and mental conditions. It may take health care providers some time to be sure that a person has GAD instead of something else.

GAD is generally treated with psychotherapy, medication or both. Cognitive behavior therapy has been found especially useful for treating GAD. Anti-anxiety medication or antidepressants are two kinds of medication that are commonly used to treat GAD.

Some people experience relief from their GAD symptoms by making changes to their lifestyle. Exercising daily, eating a healthy diet and getting plenty of sleep are some of the lifestyle changes that seem to help.



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