

## Introduction

A phobia is a type of anxiety disorder. It is a strong, irrational fear of something that poses little or no actual danger.

There are many specific phobias. For example, a person could have an intense fear of heights or a fear of public places.

This reference summary will help you understand phobias. It discusses the symptoms, causes, diagnosis and treatment of phobias.

## Phobias

A phobia is a type of anxiety disorder. It is a strong, irrational fear of something that poses little or no actual danger.

The fear caused by a phobia is greater than the brief anxiety people feel when dealing with a stressful or frightening situation. Fear caused by phobias is severe and long-lasting. It can affect a person's ability to be successful at work or in a social setting.

Phobias are divided into three categories:

- Specific phobias
- Social phobia
- Agoraphobia, or a fear of open or public places

Specific phobias are a fear of specific objects or situations. For example, a person with claustrophobia has a fear of enclosed spaces. A person with arachnophobia has a fear of spiders. There are many kinds of specific phobias.

Social phobia is a fear of people. This fear goes beyond shyness. Social phobia causes a person to feel extremely self-conscious.



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They have a fear of being humiliated or scrutinized in front of others. They also fear being negatively evaluated by others.

A fear of open or public places is known as agoraphobia. It often develops after a person experiences one or more panic attacks. These people fear being in places that would be difficult to escape if a panic attack happened. This includes places such as elevators, malls, crowded rooms, or wide-open spaces.



People with phobias try to avoid what they are afraid of. If they cannot, they may experience severe physical and psychological reactions. Reactions include rapid heartbeat, shortness of breath, and intense panic.

Phobias can cause problems that affect many aspects of life. Complications caused by phobias include:

- Social isolation
- Depression
- Substance abuse

## Symptoms

People react to phobias in similar ways. The following section reviews the symptoms commonly associated with phobias.

People with phobias have an uncontrollable feeling of anxiety when faced with the thing they fear. For example, agoraphobia may cause a person to become very afraid when getting on an elevator.

People with phobias may feel compelled to do everything possible to avoid the thing they fear. For example, a person with agoraphobia may choose to walk up ten flights of stairs to avoid being stuck in an elevator.

People with phobias may have difficulty functioning normally because of their anxiety. This can cause problems at work and in social settings.

People with phobias often know that their fears are unreasonable. However, they feel powerless to control these fears.

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Some people with phobias become afraid or nervous just by thinking about the thing they fear.

Children with phobias often throw tantrums when faced with the thing they fear. They may cling to an adult or cry.

Phobias also cause physical symptoms, including:

- Rapid heartbeat
- Sweating
- Difficulty breathing

### **Causes & Risk Factors**

The exact cause of phobias is unknown. Scientists believe that phobias may be caused by certain chemicals in the brain, genetics, or traumatic experiences.

However, more research needs to be done to confirm the cause of phobias.



Although the exact cause of phobias is unknown, there are some risk factors associated with phobias. Risk factors are factors that can increase your chances of developing a certain medical condition. Having a risk factor does not mean you will develop the condition.

There appears to be a link between a person's phobias and the phobias of his or her parents. Children may learn phobias by seeing a family member react to an object or a situation.

Being involved in a traumatic event is also a risk factor for developing a phobia. People who experienced a traumatic event, such as being trapped in a mine or surviving an airplane disaster, often develop specific phobias related to that event.

Age is a risk factor for phobias. Social phobia usually develops before age 25. Specific phobias related to the environment or personal injury often first appear in childhood, as early as age 5. A fear of elevators, bridges, flying and other phobias related to a situation often develop by the mid-20s.

Gender may be a risk factor for phobias. Females appear to be more likely to have a specific or social phobia than males. They also have an increased risk for developing agoraphobia. However, it is possible that males don't talk about their phobias as openly as women.

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## Diagnosis

If you believe that you have a phobia, help is available. Your primary healthcare provider is the first person you should talk to when seeking treatment for a phobia. He or she will likely refer you to a mental healthcare provider if a genuine phobia is suspected.

To get the most from your appointment:

- Record the symptoms you are experiencing
- Write down any recent life changes or major stresses
- Create a list of all the medications you are taking, including vitamins and supplements

Diagnosis of phobias is based on a clinical interview. Your healthcare provider will ask you questions. He or she will use certain guidelines to determine whether your symptoms are caused by a phobia or some other medical condition.



You may be diagnosed with a phobia if you have:

- Constant, intense fear
- Anxiety when confronted by your fear
- Fear that is recognized as excessive, unreasonable

Your healthcare provider will also determine if:

- The source of fear is avoided at all costs or endured with intense anxiety or distress
- Your symptoms cannot be explained by another medical condition

In children and teens, a phobia will only be suspected if symptoms have been present for six months or more. Children also 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.

Depending on the type of phobia you have, the criteria used to diagnose it may vary slightly.

## Treatment

If you have a phobia, it is unlikely to get better without some type of treatment. The goal of treatment is to lessen your anxiety and help you better control your reaction to

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the object or situation that you fear.

Treatment of a phobia usually involves medications, behavior therapy, or both. The medications most often used to treat phobias include:

- Antidepressants
- Sedatives: sedatives are a drug or substance used to calm a person down, relieve anxiety, or help a person sleep.
- Beta blockers: beta blockers are a type of medicine used to treat high blood pressure, glaucoma, and migraines.

Never start or stop a medication without first talking to your healthcare provider. Also be aware that some medications are effective only if they are taken regularly. The symptoms may come back if the medication is stopped.

Your healthcare provider may suggest a form of behavior therapy to treat your phobia. Behavior therapy for phobias often consists of desensitization or exposure therapy.



Desensitization or exposure therapy seeks to change the way you respond to an object or situation that you fear. If you are treated with this kind of therapy, you will gradually be exposed to the cause of your phobia over the course of many sessions until you learn how to control your anxiety.

Cognitive behavioral therapy is another form of therapy used to treat phobias. It is a more comprehensive form of therapy that helps you master and control your thoughts and feelings. You learn different ways of thinking about your fears and the way they affect your life.

Social phobias are often treated with antidepressants or beta blockers. Specific phobias are often treated with behavioral therapy. Agoraphobia tends to be treated with a type of anti-depressant medication and behavior therapy.

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Another method for reducing anxiety is called Emotional Freedom Techniques, or EFT. EFT uses verbal affirmations and tapping on certain points throughout the body. More research is needed, but this technique may allow people to overcome their phobias in a short period of time.

Talk to your healthcare provider about which treatment option is best for you. Together, you can develop a plan to overcome your phobia.

## **Summary**

A phobia is a type of anxiety disorder. It is a strong, irrational fear of something that poses little or no actual danger. People with phobias try to avoid what they are afraid of. If they cannot, they may experience severe physical and psychological reactions.

Phobias cause problems that affect many aspects of life. Social isolation, depression, and substance abuse are some complications that may be caused by phobias.

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

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

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

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



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