Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Adult

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is a mental health disorder. People with this condition constantly worry about everyday events. Unlike normal anxiety, worry related to GAD is not triggered by a specific event. These worries also do not fade or get better with time. GAD interferes with life functions, including relationships, work, and school.

GAD can vary from mild to severe. People with severe GAD can have intense waves of anxiety with physical symptoms (*panic attacks*).

**What are the causes?**

The exact cause of GAD is not known.

**What increases the risk?**

This condition is more likely to develop in:

- Women.
- People who have a family history of anxiety disorders.
- People who are very shy.
- People who experience very stressful life events, such as the death of a loved one.
- People who have a very stressful family environment.

**What are the signs or symptoms?**

People with GAD often worry excessively about many things in their lives, such as their health and family. They may also be overly concerned about:

- Doing well at work.
- Being on time.
- Natural disasters.
- Friendships.

Physical symptoms of GAD include:

- Fatigue.
- Muscle tension or having muscle twitches.
- Trembling or feeling shaky.
- Being easily startled.
- Feeling like your heart is pounding or racing.
- Feeling out of breath or like you cannot take a deep breath.
- Having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep.
- Sweating.
- Nausea, diarrhea, or irritable bowel syndrome (IBS).
- Headaches.
- Trouble concentrating or remembering facts.
- Restlessness.
- Irritability.
How is this diagnosed?

Your health care provider can diagnose GAD based on your symptoms and medical history. You will also have a physical exam. The health care provider will ask specific questions about your symptoms, including how severe they are, when they started, and if they come and go. Your health care provider may ask you about your use of alcohol or drugs, including prescription medicines. Your health care provider may refer you to a mental health specialist for further evaluation.

Your health care provider will do a thorough examination and may perform additional tests to rule out other possible causes of your symptoms.

To be diagnosed with GAD, a person must have anxiety that:

• Is out of his or her control.
• Affects several different aspects of his or her life, such as work and relationships.
• Causes distress that makes him or her unable to take part in normal activities.
• Includes at least three physical symptoms of GAD, such as restlessness, fatigue, trouble concentrating, irritability, muscle tension, or sleep problems.

Before your health care provider can confirm a diagnosis of GAD, these symptoms must be present more days than they are not, and they must last for six months or longer.

How is this treated?

The following therapies are usually used to treat GAD:

• Medicine. Antidepressant medicine is usually prescribed for long-term daily control. Antianxiety medicines may be added in severe cases, especially when panic attacks occur.
• Talk therapy (psychotherapy). Certain types of talk therapy can be helpful in treating GAD by providing support, education, and guidance. Options include:
  ◦ Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). People learn coping skills and techniques to ease their anxiety. They learn to identify unrealistic or negative thoughts and behaviors and to replace them with positive ones.
  ◦ Acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT). This treatment teaches people how to be mindful as a way to cope with unwanted thoughts and feelings.
  ◦ Biofeedback. This process trains you to manage your body's response (physiological response) through breathing techniques and relaxation methods. You will work with a therapist while machines are used to monitor your physical symptoms.
• Stress management techniques. These include yoga, meditation, and exercise.

A mental health specialist can help determine which treatment is best for you. Some people see improvement with one type of therapy. However, other people require a combination of therapies.

Follow these instructions at home:

• Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your health care provider.
• Try to maintain a normal routine.
• Try to anticipate stressful situations and allow extra time to manage them.
• Practice any stress management or self-calming techniques as taught by your health care provider.
• **Do not** punish yourself for setbacks or for not making progress.
• Try to recognize your accomplishments, even if they are small.
• Keep all follow-up visits as told by your health care provider. This is important.

**Contact a health care provider if:**

• Your symptoms do not get better.
• Your symptoms get worse.
• You have signs of depression, such as:
  ◦ A persistently sad, cranky, or irritable mood.
  ◦ Loss of enjoyment in activities that used to bring you joy.
  ◦ Change in weight or eating.
  ◦ Changes in sleeping habits.
  ◦ Avoiding friends or family members.
  ◦ Loss of energy for normal tasks.
  ◦ Feelings of guilt or worthlessness.

**Get help right away if:**

• You have serious thoughts about hurting yourself or others.

If you ever feel like you may hurt yourself or others, or have thoughts about taking your own life, get help right away. You can go to your nearest emergency department or call:

• Your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.).
• A suicide crisis helpline, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. This is open 24 hours a day.

**Summary**

• Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is a mental health disorder that involves worry that is not triggered by a specific event.
• People with GAD often worry excessively about many things in their lives, such as their health and family.
• GAD may cause physical symptoms such as restlessness, trouble concentrating, sleep problems, frequent sweating, nausea, diarrhea, headaches, and trembling or muscle twitching.
• A mental health specialist can help determine which treatment is best for you. Some people see improvement with one type of therapy. However, other people require a combination of therapies.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.