

Anxiety: Overview



What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a feeling of fear, worry, nervousness or unease. It acts as the body's alarm system to warn us when there may be a threat. When faced with a threat, our body thinks there are only two choices: to fight the threat or flee from it.

Anxiety is a normal part of life. Every child feels anxiety at some point. Many anxieties are a part of growing up and usually pass. They usually occur in response to particular situations, such as a test, a class presentation or a move to a new school. Typically, they last for a short time, for example days or weeks.

What is an anxiety disorder?

An anxiety disorder occurs when anxious feelings or worry become overwhelming for your child. They can affect your child's appetite, sleep or mood and, in turn, interfere with their daily activities and overall enjoyment of life.

What causes an anxiety disorder?

The exact causes of an anxiety disorder are not clear, but a number of risk factors usually exist.

Biological factors

Biological factors include our genes, as many anxiety disorders run in families.

Temperamental factors

Temperamental factors relate to a child's temperament, for instance if they are naturally anxious or sensitive. This is usually obvious from a child's infancy, for instance being more anxious or sensitive to a variety of things from a very young age.

Social or environmental factors

Social and environmental factors include experiences such as bullying, illness, problems at school, arguments with friends and major changes in the family such as moving house or the divorce of parents.

Anxiety does not result from any single risk factor of those listed above. Instead, it occurs when several factors occur together.

How common are anxiety disorders in children?

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health disorder in children. About 10 to 20 percent of children and teens will develop an anxiety disorder.

How to help your child with anxiety

- Take time to listen to your child and understand their fears and worries.

- Help your child understand that anxiety is normal and can be faced.
- Reassure and encourage your child to face what they fear, but resist providing too much reassurance.
- Resist accommodating your child's anxiety. In other words, do not let your child avoid situations that cause them anxiety.
- Look at your own anxiety levels to see if they might be affecting your child.
- Make sure to be a role model for good coping strategies for your child, for instance by facing your own fears.
- If your child's anxiety seems excessive or is worsening, seek professional advice.

When to see a doctor about your child's anxiety

See a doctor if your child's anxiety:

- is persistent and does not improve after you have provided encouragement and reassurance
- interferes strongly with your child's everyday activities, such as preventing your child from attending school, after-school activities or even fun activities such as play dates
- disrupts your family routine, for example if your child cannot sleep alone or be alone in an area of the home or if your child's ongoing need for reassurance prevents you from enjoying family activities.

Your child's doctor can diagnose your child based on typical signs and symptoms.

Go to your nearest emergency department if your child is experiencing suicidal thinking or behaviour.

Does anxiety occur with other conditions?

Yes, several anxiety disorders can occur together. Anxiety can also often occur with other conditions, including:

- oppositional defiant disorder (ODD)
- ADHD
- learning disabilities
- depression
- substance use disorders
- eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia or binge eating disorder and
- bipolar disorder.

Key points

- Anxiety is a normal part of life and usually lasts a matter of days or weeks. It becomes a disorder when it lasts a number of months and interferes with your child's everyday activities.
- Anxiety has a number of causes, including our genes, our temperament and our environment.
- Help your child cope with anxiety by reassuring them and encouraging them to face their fears.
- Anxiety often runs in families. Look at your own anxiety levels and assess if they are affecting your child.
- See a doctor if your child is no longer attending school or after-school activities, or if your family's routine is disrupted. Go to

your nearest emergency department if your child has thoughts of suicide.

- Multiple anxiety disorders can occur together. Sometimes anxiety occurs with oppositional defiant disorder, ADHD, learning disabilities and other conditions.

Resources

The following books have some useful advice about anxiety for parents and families.

- *Keys to Parenting Your Anxious Child* by Katharina Manassis
- *Raising Your Spirited Child* by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka
- *What To Do When You Worry Too Much* by Dawn Huebner
- *Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents* by Ronald Rapee, Ann Wignall, Susan Spence
- *If Your Adolescent Has an Anxiety Disorder: An Essential Resource for Parents* by Edna B. Foa, Linda Wasmer Andrews

