

Anxiety Disorder: Facts for Families

Anxiety is a normal emotion that everyone has. However, for some youth, these feelings outgrow the situation, like a fire alarm that goes off when there is no fire. If your child or teen has fears and worries that get in the way of their ability to function, this may be a sign of an anxiety disorder. Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health disorders among youth. At any time, about 8% to 12% of children and teens have at least one anxiety disorder.

What are symptoms of anxiety disorder?

- Fears or worries about being away from parents or caregivers.
- Fears or worries about what others think of you, being embarrassed or making mistakes in social situations.
- Worries about and having a hard time separating from parents or caregivers.
- Not speaking in situations that youth typically speak in, despite being able to speak.
- Worries about doing well in school, the health and safety of one's self or loved ones, the future, going to the doctor or dentist, things going on in the community or world (e.g., global warming, earthquakes).
- Extreme fears about one very specific thing (e.g., bugs, flying shots).
- Concerns around being contaminated by dirt or germs, being responsible for something terrible happening, intrusive scary thoughts, fears of doing something you actually do not want to do.
- Avoiding or refusing to go to school or other activities.
- Seeking excessive reassurance from caregivers.
- Excessive washing, checking, redoing, and having to do things in a certain order or routine.
- Body symptoms like:
 - Racing heart, difficulty breathing, feeling dizzy
 - Headaches, stomachaches
 - Tense muscles
 - Restlessness
 - Feeling tired
 - Difficulty sleeping or eating
 - Irritability

What causes anxiety disorder?

Children and teens can have anxiety for many reasons. There is not one single cause; however, many children and teens with anxiety disorders come from families where parents or other family members also have anxiety disorders. Sometimes parents unknowingly model fears and worries or reinforce anxious and avoidant behaviors in their children while trying to help them cope. Some children have an anxious temperament and have reacted to new situations in a fearful way since birth or early childhood.

1 of 2

To Learn More

- Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine: Support and Crisis Services 206-987-2164, option 4
- Adolescent Medicine 206-987-2028
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.



What is the impact of anxiety disorder?

Anxiety disorders in children and teens that are untreated can lead to:

- Continued worsening of anxiety symptoms
- Academic and social impairment
- School avoidance and underachievement
- Increased risk of depression and other mental health disorders
- Increased risk of substance abuse
- Family and social problems

How is anxiety disorder treated?

Treatment for anxiety disorders focuses on helping your child build skills to cope with situations that cause anxiety, and helping them return to functioning at their age level. There are two main parts of treatment:

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy focuses on helping your child gradually face the fears and worries they have been avoiding (called “exposures”). It is important that a parent or caregiver be involved. They learn how to coach their child on using adaptive skills when they are anxious and reduce avoidance or unhelpful ways of dealing with anxiety.
- Medicine – Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRIs) are common medicines used to treat anxiety in youth and are helpful when combined with cognitive behavioral therapy. Other medicines can also be helpful.

Is treatment helpful?

After therapy is complete, 55% to 80% of children and youth have a significant reduction in anxiety symptoms and improve in their overall functioning (for example, less avoidance of anxiety-provoking situations).

Recommended reading

For parents:

Helping Your Anxious Child: A Step-by-Step Guide for Parents

Ronald Rapee, Ann Wignall, Susan Spence, Vanessa Cobham and Heidi Lyneham, 2008

For children:

What to Do When You Worry Too Much: A Kid’s Guide to Overcoming Anxiety

Dawn Huebner, 2005