



Anxiety Disorder: Facts for Families

Recommended Reading

For parents:

Helping Your Anxious Child

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

For children:

• What to Do When You Worry Too Much

by Dawn Huebner

What are the symptoms of anxiety disorder?

Anxiety symptoms such as fears and worries are very common in children and adolescents. Many children are afraid of the dark, worry about tests or school performance, feel shy when meeting new people, and sometimes get upset when away from parents or caregivers. If your child or adolescent has fears and worries that get in the way of their ability to function, this may be a sign of an anxiety disorder. Common symptoms include:

- Worrying more days than not for at least 6 months
- Trouble controlling the worry
- Anxiety or worry that causes feelings such as:
 - Restlessness or feeling on edge
 - Being easily tired
 - Trouble concentrating or mind going blank
 - Irritability
 - Muscle tension
 - Problems falling asleep or staying asleep
- Fears of being in social or performance situations, including worries about being embarrassed, and avoiding these situations
- Extreme fears about specific objects or situations (dogs, flying, shots, bugs) and very strong anxiety when around these events or situations
- Often upset when separated from parents or caregivers
- A lot of worry about losing, or harm coming to, parents or caregivers
- Trouble sleeping away from parents or caregivers because of worries
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, feeling sick to the stomach when separated from parents or caregivers
- Refusing to go to school due to worries or physical symptoms

How common are anxiety disorders?

Anxiety disorders are a fairly common problem faced by children and teens, but often go undiagnosed. At any given time, about 6% to 20% of children and teens are struggling with anxiety disorders. Girls are somewhat more likely than boys to report anxiety symptoms. For many children who come to treatment with behavior problems, the underlying cause is severe anxiety symptoms.

To Learn More

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

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your child's 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 causes anxiety disorders?

Children and teens can have anxiety for many reasons. There isn't one single cause; however, many children and teens with anxiety disorders come from families where parents or other family members also have anxiety disorders. Some children have an anxious temperament and are more likely to feel anxiety in their body. This can lead to avoidant behaviors. Sometimes parents unknowingly model fears and worries or reinforce anxious and avoidant behaviors in their children while trying to help them cope.

What is the impact of anxiety disorders?

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

- Academic and social impairment
- School refusal
- Increased risk of depression
- Increased risk of substance abuse
- Family problems
- Repeated episodes of anxiety

How are anxiety disorders treated?

Treatment for anxiety disorders focuses on helping your child build skills to cope with situations that cause anxiety, and returning your child to normal age-level functioning. There are three main types of treatment:

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy to help your child gradually face the fears and worries they have been avoiding. Relaxation skills are also taught to help your child manage the physical symptoms of 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.
- Parent-child and family interventions – addressing parent-child relationships in therapy can help you learn to coach your child on skills to use when feeling anxious and to stop them from avoiding difficult situations.

Is treatment helpful?

After therapy is complete, 20% to 50% of children may still have symptoms of an anxiety disorder, but most youth show improved functioning (for example, less avoidance of fearful situations).