

Anxiety Disorders: A Fact Sheet to Share

We all feel anxious sometimes, but when feeling anxious interferes with your daily life, it is possible that an anxiety disorder might be the cause. Ongoing feelings of worry, distress, fear unexplained nervousness or a rising sense of dread is not normal and not a natural part of aging. Those suffering with an anxiety disorder likely realize that their feelings don't make sense, but they cannot stop or control them. Up to 14% of older adults meet the diagnostic criteria for an anxiety disorder.ⁱ

Risk Factors of Late Life Anxietyⁱ

- Chronic medical conditions, especially chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), cardiovascular disease, thyroid disease and diabetes
- Perceived or self-reported poor health
- Sleep disturbances
- Side effects of medications, such as steroids, antidepressants, stimulants, inhalers*
- Alcohol or drug (prescription or over-the-counter) misuse or abuse
- Physical limitations in daily activities
- Stressful life events or traumatic or stressful childhood events
- Over-concern with physical symptoms

* In some cases, symptoms of anxiety are directly related to a physical illness or medication taken for an illness. Those with chronic heart disease have a higher rate of anxiety, and anxiety can be a side effect of several prescribed medications. Steroids, antidepressants, stimulants, inhalers and especially heart medications may cause anxiety. It is important to talk to your doctor if you believe that you may be suffering needlessly due to a condition or medication.

Symptom and Warning Signs of Anxiety Disorders

Despite being highly treatable, anxiety disorder is often unrecognized and goes untreated. Many people have lived with anxiety for so long that it becomes "normal" and part of their daily life. Symptoms can arise without warning. For other people, the symptoms are often felt physically so it might go unrecognized as an anxiety disorder. Older adults often visit the doctor or emergency room with complaints of physical symptoms before eventually being diagnosed with an anxiety disorder. The medical testing is often long, expensive and can be frightening.

To avoid this common problem, read the following symptoms carefully:

Mental or Emotional Symptoms

- Expectation of disaster
- Feeling overwhelmed by daily routines or tasks
- In ability to overcome concerns – concerns may intensify without reason
- Difficulty relaxing, easily startled
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions

Physical Symptoms

- Chest pain or discomfort, pressure or squeezing sensation
- Headaches
- Stomach problems, nausea
- Frequent urination
- Shortness of breath, feeling smothered, or choking

If these symptoms apply to you, it is important that you seek treatment. Other types of anxiety disorders do exist and are listed below. Regardless of the type, anxiety disorders are highly treatable with proper therapy from a professional.

Other Types of Anxiety Disorders

Panic Disorder – characterized by feelings of terror that may come out of nowhere or can be a reaction to a particular circumstance. The anxiety manifests physically and shares symptoms with a heart attack. A panic attack may last anywhere between 5 and 30 minutes.

Phobias – a deep-seated fear that is irrational and attached to a feared object, situation or activity.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) – obsessions (repeated, upsetting thoughts and images) consume an individual's life, leading to engagement in repetitive rituals (compulsions) in an attempt to reduce anxiety.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – survivors of disaster or trauma re-experience the event in flashbacks, nightmares and involuntary remembrances often triggering the same physical symptoms they experienced during the incident. PTSD can become active decades after the traumatic event took place.

For information about finding treatment, look for the Maryland Coalition on Mental Health and Aging's fact sheet "[Accessing Mental Health Care in Maryland.](#)"

More information can be found on the website www.mdaging.org

If you would like more information or assistance, contact Kim Burton at:

kburton@mhamd.org

(443) 901-1550x210

ⁱ Wolitzky-Taylor KB, Castriotta N, et al., (2010). Anxiety disorders in older adults: A comprehensive review. *Depression and Anxiety*. 27:190-211.