

# Anxiety

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a common condition. It is a normal, human reaction to stressful situations.

It's good to know there are many ways to manage anxiety so it doesn't affect your daily life.

## What does anxiety feel like?

Anxiety can make you feel nervous, worried, panicky and fearful. You might feel anxious at different times, like when you are under pressure at work. Most of the time, your emotions will calm down after the stressful situation has passed.

## When does anxiety become an anxiety disorder?

If you feel anxious for no reason, your anxiety doesn't go away or your anxiety affects your quality of life, you might have an anxiety disorder. One in three women are affected by an anxiety disorder at some stage in their life.



## Symptoms of anxiety

People have different experiences of anxiety. Symptoms can vary depending on the type and level of anxiety.

### Physical symptoms

When you have anxiety, your body can react in different ways.

For example, you might experience:

- sweating
- a rapid heart rate
- a dry mouth
- difficulty breathing
- feeling sick in the stomach.

### Mental and emotional symptoms

When you feel anxious, you might experience different mental and emotional symptoms.

For example, you might:

- think about your fears a lot
- imagine worst-case scenarios (also known as 'catastrophising')
- fear that people will notice you're anxious
- fear that you will have physical symptoms associated with your anxiety
- have racing thoughts that feel uncontrollable.

### Behavioural symptoms

Sometimes anxiety can lead to changes in the way you behave.

For example, you might:

- avoid situations where you might feel judged or embarrassed
- avoid talking to others, especially strangers
- avoid places that might make you feel anxious, such as shopping centres or lifts
- struggle to meet work, study or home commitments
- find it hard to sleep.

## What causes anxiety?

What causes one person to feel anxious may not have the same effect on another person. Anxiety is usually caused by a combination of factors.

Common causes of anxiety include:

- family history
- personality traits, beliefs and attitudes
- stressful events
- physical health problems
- other mental health problems.

There are several women's health conditions that are associated with anxiety – for example, endometriosis and polycystic ovary syndrome. Different life stages can also increase anxiety, such as puberty, pregnancy, after childbirth and during menopause.

## Managing anxiety

You don't need to struggle with anxiety – there are lots of ways to manage it. One of the most important things you can do is to be kind to yourself.

Try not to judge yourself (e.g. "what's wrong with me?" or "why can't I handle this?") as this can make you feel worse. Instead, acknowledge your feelings and remember you're doing the best you can.

What works for each of us will be different. You may need to try a few different approaches before you find one that helps you.

### Practical tips

You can try a range of self-help strategies.

For example:

- identify and understand your triggers
- change negative thoughts to positive thoughts (e.g. "I can't" to "I can")
- remember: anxiety is a feeling, not a fact
- change your focus from thinking to doing
- talk to someone you trust
- practise relaxation and mindfulness techniques.

## Looking after yourself

When you put yourself first and look after your health, this may help to improve your mood and reduce feelings of anxiety.

For example:

- eat healthy foods and choose water over sugary drinks
- do physical activities you enjoy, like walking, swimming or group training
- avoid taking drugs or drinking alcohol
- get a good night's sleep.

## When to see your doctor

If anxiety disrupts your daily life or you feel fearful most of the time, it's a good idea to talk to your doctor. The earlier you seek help, the sooner you can feel better.

Your doctor can write a mental health treatment plan, which gives you a set number of sessions with a health professional at a reduced cost. The referral would be to someone with experience managing anxiety.

For example:

- a psychologist (registered mental health professional)
- a psychiatrist (medical doctor who can prescribe medication)
- a registered counsellor.

Depending on your situation, your health professional may recommend you try:

- practical self-help strategies
- different types of medication.

You might need to try a few options before you find the right treatment for you.

For more information, visit [jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/anxiety](https://jeanhailes.org.au/health-a-z/anxiety)

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your medical practitioner.

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Jean Hailes takes a broad and inclusive approach to the topic of women's health. The terms 'women' and 'girls' are used throughout this resource to refer to all women, girls, and gender-diverse people.

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