

Anxiety Disorders

Suggestions on what to discuss with your health care providers to help you receive high-quality care





What are anxiety disorders?

It's natural to feel anxious in stressful situations. Challenges at work, school, or home can spark fear and worry. Usually, anxiety goes away once a situation passes and things are resolved. But sometimes, anxiety continues or comes up in response to things that don't seem to affect other people.

When anxiety symptoms—such as worry or fear you can't control, trouble concentrating or sleeping, or a faster heart rate—don't go away on their own or get in the way of your everyday activities, this could be a sign of an anxiety disorder.

Living with an anxiety disorder is not easy. It is common—and OK—to feel self-conscious or worried about your symptoms. Although it may be difficult, talking with health care providers about your concerns and symptoms can help you get treatment that will help you feel better.

This guide can help you get ready for conversations with your health care providers. It shares what you can expect at your appointments and suggests things to discuss, like:

- [Getting help or a diagnosis](#)
- [Treatment options](#)
- [Follow-up care and planning for the future](#)
- [Helpful resources](#)

The questions included in this guide are optional. You're in control, so you can choose which ones you want to ask. There may also be other questions you want to add.



Are you in crisis? If you feel you need immediate help:

Contact your family doctor or nurse practitioner

Go to the nearest hospital or emergency room

Call 9-1-1

Call Telehealth Ontario at 1-866-797-0000

Call a helpline:

- Kids Help Phone: text CONNECT to 686868 or call 1-800-668-6868
- ConnexOntario: 1-866-531-2600
- [Ontario Distress Centres](#): Find a number for a crisis centre near you

If you're a family member or friend:

You're an important part of the care team, and this guide can help you support your family member or friend as they manage and treat their anxiety disorder. Throughout this guide, there are suggested questions you can ask their health care provider, too.

Anxiety disorders are common. One in three people has an anxiety disorder. Also, there are different types of anxiety disorders. This guide is written for people with the types outlined below:

Specific phobia involves a heightened fear of an object or situation, such as an animal or heights. This fear affects the person's ability to do what they need or want to do.

Social anxiety disorder involves anxiety about interacting with others or being the centre of attention. There's a fear of being judged, embarrassed, or humiliated.

Generalized anxiety disorder involves excessive worry about many things, such as work, health, or family, with symptoms like insomnia or trouble concentrating.

Panic disorder involves sudden, unexpected, recurring episodes of fear, along with physical symptoms like dizziness and trouble breathing. There might also be a fear that something terrible will happen, like losing control or dying. Individuals also worry about the panic attacks and often avoid situations where they might have more attacks (see “Agoraphobia”).

Agoraphobia is a fear of situations that may feel difficult to escape or where it’s hard to find help, such as in crowds or on public transportation. The fear is also focused on having a panic attack or symptoms that are sometimes associated with panic attacks.



Learn more

[“Why Are You Anxious?”](#) a video by AsapSCIENCE, shares some details about anxiety disorders and an overview of the different types



Talking about: getting help or a diagnosis

Your health care provider can help you find answers about why you feel anxious or react to certain things with fear or distress. They'll also guide you through the steps toward feeling better.

What can I do at this stage?

Reaching out to your health care provider, such as your family doctor or nurse practitioner, is a good first step. They will want to know about your symptoms to help make an accurate diagnosis.

Before your visit, think about how you feel physically and emotionally. For example, consider telling your health care provider if you experience more worry or fear, panic, and nervousness than you feel you can manage. Or if you have physical symptoms, such as restlessness, tense muscles, sweating, or trouble sleeping. You can also share:

- If there's anything at home, work, or school (including college or university) that makes things better or worse
- If talking about your anxiety makes you self-conscious or afraid
- If you've tried any treatments for anxiety before
- If your family has a history of anxiety or any mood disorders like depression or bipolar disorder
- If drugs or alcohol use are having a negative effect on your life

This information will help your health care provider decide if you show signs of an anxiety disorder. If you do, they will do a more formal assessment (or refer you to someone who will) to identify the specific disorder type, how severe it is, and what the next steps should be.

Questions you can ask your health care provider:

- How do we figure out if I have an anxiety disorder?
- Do I have an anxiety disorder? If yes, what kind?
- Will I get better?

When somebody takes you seriously, the positive emotion is that sense of relief ... that you have a partner in your care.



PERSON WITH AN ANXIETY DISORDER



Write it down

It can help to take notes during the visit. If it's hard for you to get down all the details, ask a friend or family member to take notes for you. That way, you can focus on the conversation with your health care provider and go back to the notes later.

If you're a family member or friend, questions you can ask the health care provider include:

- What do I need to know about this diagnosis?
- As a parent or guardian of a child with an anxiety disorder, how can I provide support (for example, through arrangements at school)?
- Who should I contact if I have questions?



Talking about: treatment options

There are different ways to treat anxiety disorders, but your treatment plan will be designed just for you. For example, learning about things you can do to deal with anxiety could be the first treatment step for someone. Another person might need therapy as their first step.

Health care providers usually recommend education, self-help, or cognitive behavioural therapy before they suggest medication.

Education and self-help

Your health care provider can give you information about your disorder and share self-help resources and Internet-based tools to help you manage anxiety. They can also recommend support groups that can help you cope.

Questions you can ask your health care provider:

- What education or self-help resources, such as workbooks or websites, can help me manage my anxiety?
- What support groups are available near me?



Resources for self-help and peer support

- [Anxiety Canada](#): Offers self-help tools and resources to help you manage your anxiety
- [Big White Wall](#): A safe and anonymous peer support community that you can access anytime, anywhere
- [BounceBack](#): A free program to help people age 15 and older to learn to manage anxiety and depression

I had a very positive experience with self-help. I found it very empowering ... For me, putting [the responsibility] back on me and [realizing] things I can change, and there's a way out of this, was hugely helpful.

PERSON WITH AN ANXIETY DISORDER

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

CBT teaches you to notice negative thinking patterns and learn how to replace them with more positive ones. It doesn't pressure you to be cheerful if you're nervous or scared, but it will gradually help you shift the way you think about and react to the things that make you anxious. For example, CBT can help someone who's anxious around social situations to gradually become more comfortable being around other people.

CBT is very helpful for most anxiety disorders for the long term. On its own, it can work just as well as medication; or, depending on the disorder type, it can be part of a treatment plan that includes medication.

Questions you can ask your health care provider:

- Is CBT a good choice for me?
- Who provides CBT? What kind of training do they have?
How can I find a health care provider who is a good fit for me?
- Will I have to pay for treatment? Are there free or low-cost options?

[It's] important to have a good provider ...

*It is possible to get the right fit. It might
be a long process, but there is definitely hope.*



PERSON WHO FOUND HELP FOR THEIR MENTAL HEALTH

Medication

Your health care provider might prescribe medication, too. The type of medication will depend on the type of anxiety disorder you have. In some cases, like treatment for specific phobias, medication may not be as effective as cognitive behavioural therapy.

Common medications for anxiety disorders include selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) or serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs). These medications are also known as “antidepressants,” but they are used to treat many different conditions, including anxiety disorders.

If your health care provider suggests a medication for your anxiety disorder, they should explain the risks and benefits so that, together, you can make an informed decision about what’s right for you.

Questions you can ask your health care provider:

- What medication might be a good choice for me?
- What are the side effects of this medication?
- If I’m feeling better, can I stop taking the medication?
- How long will it take before I feel better?
What should I do if I don’t feel better or my symptoms get worse?

If you’re a family member or friend, you can ask the health care provider:

- What can I do to help and support my family member or friend during their treatment?
- What resources or support groups can help me as I support someone with an anxiety disorder?



Talking about: follow-up care and planning for the future

Education, self-help, cognitive behavioural therapy, or medication can help you manage your anxiety disorder. As you start to feel better, your health care provider should monitor your progress to make sure the treatment is helping.

Even after you have been feeling better for awhile, feelings of fear and anxiety could come back, along with old reactions. Your treatment plan should let you know how to spot signs of returning symptoms before they get worse, how to manage them, and when you should reach out for support.

Questions you can ask your health care provider:

- What should I expect as things get better?
- What can I do to prevent my symptoms from getting unmanageable again?
- How often do I need to see my health care provider if I'm doing well?
- If symptoms return, can I get care right away, or will I be on a wait list?

If you're a family member or friend, you can ask the health care provider:

- What are signs of symptoms that I can watch for?
- How can I support my family member or friend during this time?



Additional resources

Navigation and referral services

[ConnexOntario](#) (1-866-531-2600): A 24/7 information and referral service that is free and confidential for people experiencing mental illness, problems with alcohol and drugs, and/or gambling.

[Family Navigation Project at Sunnybrook](#): A non-profit program designed to provide expert navigation of the mental health and addictions service system for youth aged 13 to 26 and their families in the Greater Toronto Area (Durham, Halton, Peel, Toronto, and York).

Helplines

[Good2Talk](#) (1-866-925-5454): A free, confidential, and anonymous helpline for post-secondary students in Ontario, with a primary focus on those aged 17 to 25. It provides professional counselling and information and referrals for mental health, addictions, and well-being.

[Kids Help Phone](#) (1-800-668-6868): This service offers bilingual professional counselling, information, referrals, and support for young people by phone, live chat, and texting.

[Ontario Distress Centres](#): A free telephone helpline for people experiencing emotional distress (including suicide), providing confidential and caring emotional support.

Find a local distress centre near you.

Youth programs

[Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario](#): “One-stop shops” to help youth ages 12 to 25 get help with a variety of needs, including their mental health.



For your reference: the quality standard in brief

Ontario Health is committed to helping patients, health care providers, and organizations improve the quality of health care in Ontario.

We know that not everyone across the province receives the right care, every time. So, to help address gaps in care, Ontario Health, through its Quality business unit, produces quality standards that outline what quality care looks like for specific conditions and situations, such as anxiety disorders. Quality standards are based on current best evidence and input from patients, caregivers, and health care providers.

This patient guide accompanies the quality standard on anxiety disorders. If you're interested in learning more about the quality standard, you can access it [here](#) or review the following statements from it that guide clinicians on how to deliver high-quality care.

Identification

People suspected to have an anxiety disorder are identified early using (1) a validated screening tool or recognized screening questions and (2) validated severity-rating scales.

Comprehensive Assessment

People suspected to have an anxiety disorder, or who have had a positive screening result for an anxiety disorder, receive a timely comprehensive assessment to determine whether they have a specific anxiety disorder, the severity of their symptoms, whether they have any comorbid conditions, and whether they have any associated functional impairment.

Support for Family

People with an anxiety disorder are encouraged to involve their family during their assessment and treatment, considering individual needs and preferences. Family members are connected to available resources and supports and provided with psychoeducation.

Stepped-Care Approach

People with an anxiety disorder receive treatment that follows a stepped-care approach, providing the least intensive, most effective intervention first, based on symptom severity, level of functional impairment, and individual needs and preferences.

Continued from the previous page

Self-Help

People with an anxiety disorder are informed about and supported in accessing self-help resources, such as self-help books, Internet-based educational resources, and support groups, considering their individual needs and preferences and in alignment with a stepped-care approach.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

People with an anxiety disorder have timely access to cognitive behavioural therapy, considering their individual needs and preferences and in alignment with a stepped-care approach. The cognitive behavioural therapy is delivered by a health care professional with expertise in anxiety disorders.

Pharmacological Treatment

People with a moderate to severe anxiety disorder, or people who are not responding to psychological treatment, are offered pharmacological treatment based on their specific anxiety disorder, considering their individual needs and preferences and in alignment with a stepped-care approach.

Monitoring

People with an anxiety disorder have their response to treatment (effectiveness and tolerability) monitored regularly over the course of treatment using validated tools in conjunction with an assessment of their clinical presentation.

Support During Initial Treatment Response

People with an anxiety disorder are informed about what to expect and supported during their initial treatment response. When initial treatment is not working, people with an anxiety disorder are reassessed. They are offered other treatment options, considering their individual needs and preferences and in alignment with a stepped-care approach.

Specialized Expertise in Anxiety Disorders

People with an anxiety disorder who have not responded adequately to treatments are connected to a health care professional with specialized expertise in anxiety disorders.

Relapse Prevention

People with an anxiety disorder who are receiving treatment are provided with information and education about how to prevent relapse and manage symptoms if they re-emerge.

Transitions in Care

People with an anxiety disorder are given appropriate care throughout their lifespan and experience seamless transitions between services and health care professionals, including between care settings and from child and adolescent services to adult services.

What's next?

Remember, everybody is different.

The support you need and the care plan you develop with your care providers in hospital and in the community will be unique to you.

This conversation guide is only a starting point.

You may have other topics you want to cover with your care providers. It's important to speak to them about any other questions or concerns.

Need more information?

If you have any questions or feedback about this guide, please contact us at qualitystandards@hqontario.ca or 1-866-623-6868.

For more reading on anxiety disorders, read the quality standard at: hqontario.ca/qualitystandards