

A Closer Look

Understanding Mental Illness

Anxiety Disorder

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

What is Generalized Anxiety Disorder?

Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is characterized by 6 months or more of chronic, exaggerated worry and tension that is unfounded or much more severe than the normal anxiety most people experience. People with this disorder usually expect the worst; they worry excessively about money, health, family, or work, even when there are no signs of trouble. They are unable to relax and often suffer from insomnia. Many people with GAD also have physical symptoms, such as fatigue, trembling, muscle tension, headaches, irritability, or hot flashes.

How common is GAD?

About 2.8 percent of the U.S. population (4 million Americans) have GAD during a year's time. GAD most often strikes people in childhood or adolescence, but can begin in adulthood. It affects women more often than men.

What Causes GAD?

Some research suggests that GAD may run in families and it may also grow worse during stress. GAD usually begins at an earlier age and symptoms may manifest themselves more slowly than in most other anxiety disorders.

What Treatments Are Available for GAD?

Treatments for GAD include medications and cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Can People with GAD Also Have Other Physical and Emotional Illnesses?

Research shows that GAD often coexist with depression, substance abuse, or other anxiety disorders. Other conditions associated with stress, such as irritable bowel syndrome, often accompany GAD. Patients with physical symptoms such as insomnia or headaches should also tell their doctors about their feelings of worry and tension. This will help the patient's health care provider to recognize that the person is suffering, from GAD.

Fact sheet adapted from material published by the National Institute of Mental Health.