

Anxiety and Distress

What is anxiety?

Anxiety is unease, fear, or distress caused by stress. Distress is emotional, mental, social, or spiritual suffering. A health issue or doctor visit can cause anxiety or distress. Being screened for cancer, waiting for test results, getting diagnosed with cancer, and worrying about cancer returning after treatment ends can all be sources of anxiety.

Feeling anxious or distressed can negatively affect your quality of life and your relationships with friends and family. Women tend to have higher rates of anxiety than men.

Anxiety can show up as different feelings such as:

- sadness
- a loss of control
- panic
- need for isolation
- fear you are going crazy

Possible physical symptoms include:

- nausea and/or vomiting
- shortness of breath
- fast heart rate
- sweating
- restlessness
- muscle tightness
- feeling faint or dizzy
- increased feelings of pain
- severe fatigue
- mood swings



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You may have a variety of symptoms or just a few; every person is different. Unfortunately, these feelings may leave you wanting to delay treatment or miss follow-up appointments, which can affect your care.

Ways to cope

Each person finds different ways to cope with their anxiety and distress. You can talk with a mental health professional such as a psychologist or psychiatrist. Or, you can speak with a social worker, palliative care specialist, or spiritual care provider. Any of these professionals can help you learn to manage your anxiety. Techniques include relaxation and mindfulness training to try at home, in-person or online support groups, and counseling or talk therapy. Speak with a member of your healthcare team if you are interested in seeing a mental health professional.

Meditation techniques or relaxation training revolve around Buddhist concepts of mindfulness and intentional and non-judgmental awareness of present moments. It focuses on helping you make connections between the mind, body, and soul. These therapies may take time to provide a full effect, so it's good to repeat the techniques. Meditation can be combined with other therapies, as well.

Other non-drug therapies to try at home include meditation, yoga, positive thinking, and breathing exercises. Listening to relaxing, light music, or nature sounds can also help lessen anxiety. You can find relaxation and meditation applications through your phone provider application (app) store. YouTube has videos to practice meditation, yoga, and breathing exercises. Roswell has some yoga videos in the Patient Education area of their YouTube channel: www.youtube.com/rpicreative

Weighted blankets are used as a deep pressure touch (DPT) to help ease anxiety. DPT provides a feeling similar to a firm hug, holding, swaddling, or massage to create a calming state of mind. You can try a standard medical-grade therapeutic weighted blanket. (You must weigh at least 100 pounds/45 kg). This therapy has not been tested on patients with fibromyalgia or peripheral neuropathy.

If none of these steps work, adding medication may help. You will need to talk to a mental health/medical professional to receive these medications. You may be prescribed antidepressants or anti-anxiety medications such as benzodiazepines. Benzodiazepines are more common for anxiety symptoms such as panic, nausea, and insomnia. For longer-term use, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) or serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) antidepressants may be used. You must take these antidepressant medications exactly as prescribed. Depending on the medication, it can take 4 to 6 weeks before you see an improvement.

Studies have shown that high anxiety can increase your perception of pain and slow wound healing. Continued anxiety can affect your immune system, and put you at higher risk for illness. If you are having high levels of anxiety or distress, please talk to your health care team.