

## ANXIETY DISORDERS

Stress is a normal part of life. And occasional anxiety is a normal reaction to stress. A certain amount of anxiety can be useful: it can keep us alert, focused, and help us do our best. Anxiety becomes a problem when it becomes overwhelming, will not go away, and gets worse over time. There are several types of anxiety disorders.

Anxiety disorders are the most common type of mental health disorder in childhood, affecting 1 in 8 children.

There are many types of anxiety disorders. Each has its own distinct symptoms. Children with anxiety disorders share a prolonged sense of intense distress. It is a combination of worry and dread that can impact all aspects of a child's daily life. The major types of anxiety disorders include:

- **Generalized anxiety disorder**, where a child worries **too much** about things. This anxiety often focuses on performance in school or sports. It may drive extreme studying or practicing, and striving for perfection. Children with this disorder can be very hard on themselves. They may seek constant approval or reassurance from others.
- **Panic disorder**, where a child suffers from unexpected panic or anxiety attacks. These attacks come on suddenly and for no apparent reason. Children with panic disorder find little relief between attacks. Between attacks, they are haunted by concerns over having another attack. They fear losing control, or “going crazy.”
- **Separation anxiety disorder**, where a child as old as nine cannot bear to be separated from a caregiver or other family member. **Separation anxiety is normal for children age three and under.** Older children who cannot bear separation may refuse to go to school, camp, or a sleepover. They might demand that someone stay with them at bedtime.
- **Social anxiety disorder**, where a child has an intense fear of social and performance situations. It is a persistent “stage fright” that can significantly impair school performance and attendance. It can also hinder a child's ability to socialize and develop friendships among peers.
- **Specific phobias**, where a child is gripped by an **intense, irrational** fear of a specific object or situation. Common childhood phobias include animals, storms, heights, water, blood, the dark, and medical procedures.
- **Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)**, where a child's behavior is ruled by unwanted and intrusive thoughts (obsessions). The child also feels compelled to perform rituals

(compulsions) to try and ease his or her anxiety. Boys are more likely to develop OCD before puberty. Among girls, the disorder tends to emerge during adolescence.

### **What are the Symptoms of Anxiety?**

Anxiety results in an inexplicable fear or preoccupation that interferes with a child's happiness and ability to do basic things. The anxiety can be puzzling both to the child and to caregivers. While each disorder has its own symptoms, there are some signs of anxiety that are characteristic of most of the disorders. These include:

- Recurring fears about routine parts of life
- Trouble sleeping at night
- Restlessness or fatigue during waking hours
- Fear of leaving home
- Fear of social situations
- Excessive worry most days of the week, for weeks on end
- Trouble concentrating
- Fear of separation from a loved one
- Frequent irritability
- Physical complaints, like stomachaches or headaches

### **How is Anxiety Diagnosed?**

- A review of current symptoms
- A thorough review of the child's development and background
- Past medical and psychiatric history
- Establishing a picture of the family background
- A mental status exam

### **How is Anxiety Treated?**

- Cognitive behavioral therapy for the child
- Medication
- Family therapy
- Caregiver education and support



Adapted From <https://www.nationwidechildrens.org/conditions/anxiety>