

# Anxiety

## What is it?

Anxiety is a physical feeling of distress, fear, or uneasiness. Although feeling anxious is a natural response for someone with cancer, in some people it can develop into a debilitating disorder. If left untreated, anxiety can grow progressively worse, making it difficult to function in everyday life.

## What are the symptoms?

Although anxiety is a common and normal response to living with cancer, occasionally it can progress to become a generalized anxiety disorder. Symptoms include:

- Sense of fear and dread
- Trembling
- Muscle aches
- Insomnia or sleep disruptions
- Stomach upset
- Dizziness
- Irritability
- Feeling a loss of control
- Rapid breathing
- Rapid heartbeat
- Chest tightness
- Muscle tension
- Difficulty concentrating
- Physical restlessness

## How is it diagnosed?

Anxiety is diagnosed based on physical and emotional symptoms.

## How is it treated?

Anxiety is most often treated with a combination of medication and psychotherapy or counseling. Medications include:

- **Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs):** This class of antidepressants works to increase levels of the brain chemical serotonin, which is thought to be linked to anxiety disorders. Medications include Paxil® (paroxetine), Prozac® (fluoxetine), Zoloft® (sertraline), Celexa® (citalopram), and Effexor® (venlafaxine).
- **Tricyclic antidepressants (TCA):** Drugs in this class of antidepressants also work by regulating serotonin levels, but they generally have more side effects than the SSRIs. Tricyclic antidepressants include Elavil® (amitriptyline), Pamelor® (nortriptyline), and Tofranil® (imipramine).
- **Benzodiazepines:** This class of drugs includes Ativan® (lorazepam), Valium® (diazepam), and Xanax® (alprazolam). They work by depressing the central nervous system.
- **Psychotherapy (talk therapy):** There are many kinds of psychotherapy, also known as talk therapy. The two most commonly used for anxiety disorders, either separately or together, are:
  - » Behavior therapy, which works to help you find ways to cope with difficult situations and to regain a sense of control.
  - » Cognitive therapy, which works to alter the harmful or unproductive thoughts that lead to anxiety.



TIPS

## Tips to Help

The following may help you cope with and reduce the level of your anxiety:

- Realize that anxiety is a normal reaction to a cancer diagnosis and treatment.
- Make sure you're getting enough sleep and exercise daily, even if only for a few minutes.
- Try relaxation techniques, such as yoga, meditation, and deep breathing.
- Join a cancer support group to help you deal with your anxiety and learn coping skills.
- Keep a cancer treatment journal and jot down your feelings.

## Words to Know

**Anxiety:** A feeling of distress, fear, or uneasiness.

**Behavior therapy:** A form of psychotherapy that focuses on finding ways to cope with difficult situations to provide a sense of control.

**Benzodiazepines:** Drugs that work by depressing the central nervous system. They are often prescribed for anxiety.

**Cognitive therapy:** A form of psychotherapy that teaches ways to alter the harmful or unproductive thoughts that often lead to anxiety.

**Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs).** Antidepressants that work to increase levels of the brain chemical serotonin.

**Tricyclic antidepressants (TCA):** Antidepressants that work by regulating serotonin levels in the brain.