

Anxiety

This leaflet has been given to you because you have been diagnosed with anxiety, or because you are suspected of suffering from anxiety.

[If you would rather read this information on your phone, you can go to www.psykiatri-regionh.dk/angst](https://www.psykiatri-regionh.dk/angst) (in Danish) or scan the QR code with your phone.



What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a natural emotion and your brain's way of reacting to danger or threats that you have to flee from to get yourself to safety.

But anxiety can become so severe that you find it difficult to lead the life you would like, for example attending to your studies, shopping for groceries or taking the train to see your friends or family.

In that case, it turns into a condition for which you need to seek help. In the vast majority of cases, it is possible to significantly alleviate the symptoms or make them disappear completely.

Anxiety can be both a disorder in itself – such as panic disorder – or a symptom of a number of mental illnesses.

Anxiety, along with depression, is the most common mental illness in Denmark, and the two conditions are often linked.

Facts: How many people suffer from anxiety?

- 2-5% of the adult population in Denmark has an anxiety disorder requiring treatment. Many more experience symptoms of anxiety but do not need treatment.
- Twice as many women as men develop an anxiety disorder.
- Anxiety typically develops from the age of 20 and rarely after the age of 30.

Causes of anxiety

Anxiety is caused by a blend of genetic and environmental factors. If you are genetically predisposed – for example, if one of your parents has an anxiety disorder – and you grow up in a stressful and unsafe environment, you have a higher risk of developing anxiety.

Perhaps because of your personality, you may grow more anxious in the face of adversity.

Twin studies show that there is a big difference in how twins tackle different situations and challenges. If they fall off their bike, for example, one twin might quickly get up and carry on, while the other twin, being more overly cautious by nature, may never get back on the bike.

Types of anxiety disorders

There are several types of anxiety disorders, but they have quite a few symptoms in common:

Panic disorder

Panic disorder usually starts between the ages of 20 and 25.

With panic disorder, you experience very sudden and severe anxiety attacks, often for no apparent reason. The attack develops within a few minutes and can be so severe that you have to flee from the situation, or, for example, open the window for air.

You may become afraid of losing self-control and going insane or dying because the attack affects your breathing and signals to the body that it lacks air. However, panic disorder is not a dangerous condition.

Agoraphobia

People suffering from agoraphobia are afraid to leave their home alone, travel by public transport and, for example, leave the town where they live.

Agoraphobia is often linked to panic disorder and may mean that you end up feeling very isolated.

Agoraphobia often starts with spontaneous panic attacks that come on very suddenly, and where you may initially think that there is something physically wrong with your body – for example, a blood clot or stress. Often you then start avoiding the places where you suffered the attacks. The treatment therefore often involves going to the places that have triggered an attack (on your own).

You can suffer from mild agoraphobia and still live with it because you can organise your life accordingly – for example, by getting your partner to do the shopping. But being dependent on other people and generally limited in what you can do can also become a challenge.

The medication you take for your anxiety symptoms may also alleviate your panic disorder symptoms, but not agoraphobia.

Social anxiety disorder

Social anxiety disorder is also called social phobia and often occurs in situations where you feel you are being judged or think that others find you embarrassing. For example, if someone expects you to speak in a group, give a presentation, eat or drink in a public place, or talk on the phone, while others can hear it.

You think excessively about what others think of you and fear that they will realise how nervous you are, causing you to blush, sweat or tremble. If you are suffering from social anxiety disorder, you may therefore avoid certain or all social situations.

Because you are so self-conscious, you may forget to listen to what is being said in class, or when others are telling you something. This can turn into such a bad experience for you that you want to avoid such situations again at all cost.

Many people suffering from social anxiety have done so all their lives and during their childhood found it difficult being with other people, going to school or nursery.

In adults, feelings of social anxiety can be so intense that it prevents them from going to university or doing a training programme, finding a partner or doing a job that involves communicating with other people. Some never start

treatment because they do not think of the condition as a disorder, but as a personality trait (shyness) that cannot be changed.

Generalised anxiety disorder

Generalised anxiety disorder can occur at any time, but often starts early in life. Children may, for example, worry a lot about their parents.

Generalised anxiety disorder is not linked to a specific situation. You are constantly anxious and worry excessively about, for example, the health of your family or your work situation: "What if I'm late, what if my kids don't get enough vitamins, what if my daughter does not remember to put on her bicycle helmet, what if I lose my job."

Many people who suffer from generalised anxiety disorder also experience depression.

Symptoms of anxiety

Symptoms of anxiety can be both physical and psychological and can range from mild to severe. You do not necessarily experience them all at once. Maybe you only experience one or two symptoms.

Often there is a so-called 'trigger' of symptoms of anxiety. Social anxiety is often triggered by, for example, a social event such as a christening.

For people suffering from a panic disorder, a panic attack may be triggered by the thought of having to take the bus.

Physical symptoms

Physical symptoms include for example:

- heart palpitations, sweating, trembling, dry mouth
- shortness of breath, sense of choking, tightness in the chest, chest pain, nausea or an upset stomach
- muscle tension or pain, restlessness, difficulty swallowing
- dizziness, feeling hot or cold, pins and needles, tendency to startle easily, difficulty concentrating, irritability or difficulty falling asleep.

Psychological symptoms

Suffering from an anxiety disorder affects your thoughts:

You may have:

- worries and fears about everyday situations

- catastrophising thinking patterns if you are faced with something you expect to trigger anxiety. For example, if you feel anxious about travelling by bus
- a strong focus on what others think of you.

Your actions

When you suffer from an anxiety disorder, you will often try to avoid whatever triggers your anxiety. It could be shopping on your own or speaking in public.

You may also have a strong urge to flee or avoid situations that cause you to feel anxious. You may develop 'safety behaviours', trying to feel more safe by carrying certain items with you or doing things in the company of certain people.

Other mental illnesses

Anxiety is also a symptom in most mental illnesses:

- Depression
- PTSD
- OCD
- Autism
- ADHD
- Schizophrenia
- Bipolar disorder
- Personality disorder
- Incipient dementia
- Drug and alcohol addiction.

Anxiety, along with depression, is the most prevalent mental illness we know, and anxiety and depression often go hand in hand: Depression can lead to anxiety and vice versa. They can also occur simultaneously. Therefore, it may be necessary for you to get help for your depression before you can be treated for your anxiety disorder.

What happens in the brain?

Anxiety can shut down the frontal lobes in the cerebral cortex area of our brain, which is involved in reasoning and controlling our emotions with logical thinking. Instead, an area of the brain called the amygdala takes control. When the body

senses danger, whether real or imaginary, stress hormones (cortisone) are secreted, which increases your heart rate and prepares you for fight and flight.

Once you feel safe again, stress hormone levels drop, allowing the cerebral cortex to function again. Many people therefore find that they do not understand what happened during an anxiety attack. Therefore, the treatment is focused particularly on reasoning techniques and controlling and managing symptoms.

Stress, anxiety and depression occur in the area of the brain that can also be stressed by, for example, drugs and alcohol.

Today we are constantly being bombarded with information about war in the world, diseases and risks. That is a lot of information to take in and process, and the very act of being in front of a screen might activate the amygdala.

How long does anxiety last?

It is impossible to say how long the disease lasts. It is not unusual to need treatment for your anxiety disorder a number of times in the course of your life, as it can flare up again, for example, due to stress.

The good news is that chances are you will recover from your anxiety disorder and feel significantly better.

Without treatment, however, anxiety can become chronic.

Duration

- About a third of people suffering from an anxiety disorder recover, but may experience a few relapses.
- Another third have persistent mild symptoms.
- The last third have severe symptoms, which, in addition to therapy, must be treated with medication.

More knowledge and counselling

Psykiatriguiden – overview for patients and relatives

In Psykiatriguiden, we have gathered all relevant information about mental illnesses, types of treatment and treatment programmes offered by the mental health services of the Capital Region of Denmark. You can also read about being a relative of a person with a mental illness.

[Find Psykiatriguiden \(in Danish\) at www.psykiatri-regionh.dk/psykiatriguiden](http://www.psykiatri-regionh.dk/psykiatriguiden) or by scanning the QR code with your phone.



Living with mental illness

[You can find specific tools designed to help you in your everyday life at www.psykiatri-regionh.dk/hverdagen](http://www.psykiatri-regionh.dk/hverdagen) (in Danish) or by scanning the QR code with your phone.



Counselling from PsykInfo

At PsykInfo in the Capital Region of Denmark, nurses with experience from the mental health services offer telephone or personal counselling to both patients and their relatives. [You can read more at www.psykiatri-regionh.dk/Psykinfo](http://www.psykiatri-regionh.dk/Psykinfo) (in Danish) or call 38 64 13 00. You can also scan the QR code with your phone.

