

Anxiety

Everyone feels nervous and anxious sometimes, especially in stressful situations. However, when fears and anxiety interfere with your child's home, school, and social life, they become a problem in need of attention. Several types of anxiety disorders are common at different ages in children and teens. Evaluation and treatment, often involving a mental health professional, can be helpful.

What is anxiety?

Anxiety can take several forms in children. Some types of anxiety are normal in children at certain ages: for example, babies become anxious when separated from their parents, while toddlers are often afraid of the dark. Anxiety is also very common in children in unfamiliar situations, such as starting school.

Anxiety becomes a problem when it starts interfering with your child's normal activities. For example, school-age children may worry about being separated from their parents and refuse to go to school. Older children may worry about bad things happening or making mistakes, and these fears may make it difficult for them to perform normal and expected activities. If anxiety is overshadowing other aspects of your child's life, it may be helpful to seek mental health care evaluation and treatment.

What does it look like?

- Anxiety is anxiousness, fears, and worries that are on your child's mind a lot of the time. Every anxious child's situation is different, depending on his or her specific circumstances and age. Nervousness and anxiety may start after holidays or around the time of a divorce or separation.
- Common symptoms include:
 - Nightmares, especially about being separated from parents.
 - Complaints of not feeling well or being emotionally upset.
 - Panic attacks.
- *Separation anxiety* may develop in younger children. Your child may be:
 - Very clingy—afraid to be separated from his or her parents.
 - Worried about something bad happening to himself or herself or to his or her parents.
 - Afraid of leaving home; he or she may be reluctant or even refuse to go to school.

- *Social anxiety* may occur in older children, associated with a lot of worries about not being accepted at school or in other social situations. Some children become socially isolated, causing even greater distress and making anxiety worse.
- *Generalized anxiety* is a problem in which anxiety or worries are a main feature of everyday life. Your child may:
 - Have a lot of unrealistic worries about things that might go wrong.
 - Be very critical of himself or herself and embarrassed about things that happened in the past.
 - Feel like he or she is incompetent—"no good at anything."
 - Feel vaguely ill a lot of the time, be very self-conscious, and need a lot of reassurance. He or she may find it very difficult to stop worrying and relax, even for a short time.
- Some specific anxiety disorders are *panic disorder*, involving periods of intense fear or discomfort (panic attacks); *obsessive-compulsive disorder*, which results in repetitive thoughts and routines; and *post-traumatic stress disorder*, in which disturbing thoughts are related to a specific, traumatic event.
- Every anxious child is different. Your child may have different symptoms, or any combination of these. *The main thing to remember is:* If anxiety is interfering with your child's normal activities, it's a good idea to talk to the doctor or another professional.

What causes anxiety?

There may be no specific cause. Anxiety disorders are common in children as well as adults. However, your child's anxiety may be related to some stressful event in his or her life, for example, marital problems in your family.

What are some possible complications of anxiety?

- Anxiety can cause serious interference in your child's life, such as panic attacks or refusing to go to school.
- Anxiety sometimes occurs together with other mental health disorders, such as depression and drug or alcohol abuse.

Can anxiety be prevented?

Everyone must deal with some anxiety in his or her life. Recognizing that your child's anxiety is interfering with his

or her normal activities and getting help may reduce this interference.

How is anxiety treated?

- If anxiety is interfering with your child's normal activities, we may recommend a visit to a child and adolescent psychiatrist or another mental health professional. This specialist can perform an evaluation to understand and, if necessary, recommend treatment for your child's anxiety.
- Several treatments for anxiety may be helpful, depending on your child's situation. Options may include:
 - *Psychotherapy or counseling.* Talking with a mental health professional can be very helpful in understanding what is causing your child's anxiety and helping him or her to deal with it.
 - One helpful type of therapy is called *cognitive behavioral therapy*. The goal is to help your child to look at his or her anxieties more realistically and learn more effective ways of dealing with them.
- Your mental health provider may recommend counseling or therapy for your child alone. Sometimes family therapy is recommended.
- *Medications.* Medications may be helpful, particularly if your child's anxiety seems severe or is causing a lot of disruption in his or her life.
- *School involvement.* If your child's anxiety is causing problems at school, your child's care may be co-coordinated with school personnel. These may include teachers, counselors, social workers, or others.
- At home, you can provide support and reassurance while helping your child to find effective ways of dealing with his or her anxieties.



When should I call your office?

Call our office if your child's anxiety gets worse, if it doesn't seem to improve after starting treatment, or if it returns after treatment. Your doctor or mental health professional can inform you about the expected results of treatment.