

What is anxiety?



Everyone feels anxious at times. When you are frightened, or feel threatened, your heart beats faster, your muscles tense, and your body prepares you to 'fight' the threat, or to run away from it – 'flight'. So anxiety is useful when it alerts you to danger or when it helps you to concentrate on something that makes you nervous.

When anxiety is a problem

Anxiety becomes a problem when you feel anxious most of the time and it affects basic things such as eating, sleeping, or being able to leave the house.

If you are anxious, you may feel restless and unable to relax, or have no energy and be easily tired. You may panic in certain situations. You may sleep badly or wake up too early in the morning. Your memory or concentration may be poor. You may feel easily irritated.

Anxiety can also show in physical ways. Your appetite or weight may go up or down. You may sweat, have a dry mouth or palpitations (racing or uneven heartbeat). You may have regular headaches, or chest or joint pains. You may feel breathless, sick, or have diarrhoea. Your hands may feel cold and clammy, or you may feel tingling in your hands or feet.

You can have any of these symptoms for other reasons but, if some of them have been happening regularly and for over six months, anxiety may be the cause.

Anxiety is common

Anxiety is very common and can start at any time of life. It can come and go, depending on what is happening in your life. Sometimes anxiety also happens when people are depressed. Some people with epilepsy have a higher risk of anxiety.

Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/links-between-epilepsy-and-mood

Anxiety may be triggered by a particular memory, such as having a seizure, and the fear that it may happen again. How you have been treated in the past, for instance being bullied or ignored, may make you worry about how people treat you now.

You may feel anxious without a specific reason. Anxiety can grow very quickly, and you can find yourself worrying about things you can't control, such as other people's problems, or worrying about how much you are worrying. Realising that anxiety is a problem is the first step in dealing with it.

Helping yourself – some ideas

Finding ways to manage your anxiety is more useful than trying to stop feeling anxious:

- Focus on something enjoyable that distracts you: music, a picture, or an activity, or sport. Exercise can improve mood and relieve stress for some people.
- Plan small achievable tasks for each day. How does it feel to get things done?
- Talk to people. Any social contact may help you feel more confident and valued.

Asking for help

Sometimes helping yourself feel better is not enough on its own and you may need extra help. Your GP can suggest other treatment options. It can be hard to ask for help and you may not like the idea of seeing a doctor about mood problems. But looking after your mental health is positive, and getting treatment can make a big difference.

'When I feel anxious, I find going for a walk or doing something helps. The worst thing I find is sitting doing nothing.'

Helpline 01494 601400
Confidential, national call rate.
Information and emotional support.
Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/helpline
for opening hours.

You can help your GP by telling them about the different feelings you have. It may help to write down what you want from the appointment before you go. Your GP can help by listening, by looking at your medical history, and by asking you what you think might help you.

If you feel your anxiety is linked to your epilepsy or to side effects of your anti-seizure medication (ASM), you can ask your GP to review your epilepsy or refer you to a neurologist.

Your GP may refer you to a local exercise programme or make suggestions about your diet. They may recommend a 'talking' therapy, medication, or a combination of different treatments. Any treatment is more likely to work if it is one you are happy with.

Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/wellbeing

'Talking' therapies

'Talking' therapies can help equip people with lots of strategies to help them deal with anxiety. There are things that you can do to help you manage your anxiety. Talking in confidence about your feelings about epilepsy may help reduce anxiety and make life more manageable. 'Talking' therapies include counselling, psychotherapy, and group therapy. The NHS Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) programme is also available to help you overcome your anxiety and manage your mental health and you can refer yourself to this service.

Visit nhs.uk/mental-health/talking-therapies-medicine-treatments/talking-therapies-and-counselling/nhs-talking-therapies

You can also call our helpline (details on page 1).

Medication

If coping with anxiety is very difficult, your GP may offer you medication, sometimes along with a 'talking' therapy. Your GP or specialist may check that you are on the right ASM first.

ASM can have both positive and negative effects on mood and will affect people differently. If you are offered medication for anxiety, your doctor can check which is the best drug for you, and one that is least likely to affect your ASM or your seizure control. Reporting side effects will help your GP to see which treatment suits you. You can also report side effects using the Yellow Card Scheme.

Visit epilepsysociety.org.uk/yellow-card-scheme

Every effort is made to ensure that all information is correct at the time of printing. Please note that information is intended for a UK audience. This information is not a substitute for advice from your own doctors. Epilepsy Society is not responsible for any actions taken as a result of using this information.

Where family and friends can help

You may not recognise that you are anxious or low. Family or friends may notice changes in your mood before you do. Comments made by others may be hard to hear but they may be worried about you.

If you are worried about someone with epilepsy who seems anxious, helpful approaches include:

- Ask how they are feeling, then listen without interrupting when they want to talk.
- Keep any comments factual, rather than giving opinions on what you think they should do.

Further information

The Royal College of Psychiatrists

rpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/problems-disorders/anxiety-panic-and-phobias

Information and resources about anxiety.

NHS UK

nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/anxiety

Information about anxiety and how to cope with it.

Anxiety UK

anxietyuk.org.uk/about-us

Charity offering support to people experiencing anxiety.

Mind

0300 123 3393

mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks

Mental health charity offering information about anxiety, and how to access treatment and support.

Mind has information too for staying mentally healthy at work.

mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/how-to-be-mentally-healthy-at-work

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For a printed copy of this information contact our helpline.

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