

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

**GENERALIZED ANXIETY DISORDER (GAD)**

**WHEN IS ANXIETY A PROBLEM?**

Everyone feels anxious or nervous from time to time.

It's NORMAL to:

- Worry about things like school, your health, money, and family problems.
- Get nervous when giving a presentation, interviewing for a job, going on a first date, etc.

It's NOT NORMAL to:

- Feel like everyday worries are taking over your life.
- Be extremely anxious or worried on most days even if there's little or no reason to worry.

If you have been experiencing excessive worrying for 6 months or more, you may be suffering from a medical condition known as generalized anxiety disorder (GAD).

This handout focuses specifically on GAD. Other types of anxiety disorders include social anxiety, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and phobias.

**HOW COMMON IS IT?**

- GAD affects about 6.8 million American adults, including twice as many women as men.
- It can occur at any time but often starts during the teen years or young adulthood.

**WHAT CAUSES IT?**

- GAD sometimes runs in families, but no one knows for sure why some people have it and others don't.
- Stress and environmental factors also contribute to the development and severity of symptoms.
- Researchers are studying parts of the brain that are involved in fear and anxiety with the goal of creating better treatments for anxiety.

**WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?**

People with GAD go through their days filled with exaggerated worry and tension, even when there is little or no reason to worry. Symptoms wax and wane, and are often worse during times of stress. When symptoms are severe, it may be difficult to complete even simple everyday tasks.

People with GAD may:

- Feel constantly "on edge" and find it difficult to relax.
- Feel very anxious about just getting through the day.
- Be afraid that things will always go badly.
- Be overly concerned about everyday things, like health, money, family, school, work, etc.
- Have trouble controlling their constant worrying.
- Know that they worry more than they should.

Physical symptoms are common and can include:

- Fatigue
- Headache, lightheadedness
- Muscle tension, muscle aches
- Chest tightness, shortness of breath
- Difficulty swallowing, stomach aches, loss of appetite, loose stools
- Having to go to the bathroom frequently
- Trouble sleeping
- Trouble concentrating or remembering things
- Trembling, sweating

GAD rarely occurs alone. It is often accompanied by other anxiety disorders, depression, substance abuse, and/or physical illnesses.

**HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED?**

GAD is diagnosed when a person worries excessively about a variety of everyday problems for at least 6 months, so much so that it becomes difficult to complete day-to-day tasks. Your medical provider will ask you questions designed to "measure" your anxiety level. You may also be asked to complete a standardized anxiety questionnaire.

Depending on your symptoms and exam findings, your medical provider may recommend further testing to determine if a physical illness is contributing to your symptoms.

**WHAT CAN I DO TO FEEL BETTER?**

- Exercise regularly. This can decrease anxiety and increase a sense of well-being.
- Avoid caffeine and other stimulants, which can worsen anxiety. Don't forget that caffeine can be found in certain headache medicines, diet pills, etc. Decongestants and ADD medications can also increase feelings of anxiety.
- Learn skills to reduce stress. Calm your mind with regular use of breathing exercises, meditation, yoga, and/or tai chi.
  - Drop in for Mindfulness Practice sessions at the Wellness Resource Center, every Thursday at 4pm.
  - Consider taking VCU's 300 level psychology course "Stress and Its Management".

Online resources include:

- [www.students.vcu.edu/counseling/self-help/ucs.html](http://www.students.vcu.edu/counseling/self-help/ucs.html) (a great self-help resource)
- [www.richmondmeditates.vcu.edu](http://www.richmondmeditates.vcu.edu) (local meditation courses and groups)
- [marc.ucla.edu](http://marc.ucla.edu) (free meditation podcasts)
- [www.calm.com](http://www.calm.com) (guided meditations; free app)
- [soundcloud.com/meditation-for-students](http://soundcloud.com/meditation-for-students)
- [www.freemindfulness.org/download](http://www.freemindfulness.org/download)
- [www.counseling.ufl.edu](http://www.counseling.ufl.edu) (search "stress and college students")

## **WHAT ARE TREATMENT OPTIONS?**

There is no reason to feel embarrassed about getting treatment for anxiety. GAD is a common medical condition that, like diabetes or hypertension, can be treated and controlled.

Specific treatment for GAD usually consists of medication(s) and/or counseling. Often, the best approach is a combination of the two. Co-existing illnesses (such as depression, alcohol abuse, etc.) will need to be treated first in order for anxiety treatments to be successful.

Keep in mind that it may take a little while to find the right treatment regimen for you. Be patient, and don't give up. Treatment can help most people with anxiety disorders lead productive, fulfilling lives.

### **❖ COUNSELING**

Meeting with a mental health professional can help you find new ways of approaching your situation so that you feel less anxious. A type of therapy known as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is especially useful in treating anxiety disorders:

- The cognitive part helps people change unhealthy thinking patterns that support their fears.
- The behavioral part helps people change the way they react to anxiety-provoking situations.

Therapists can also teach deep breathing and other techniques to relieve anxiety and decrease stress.

Services are free to VCU students at **University Counseling Services (UCS)**. Call 828-6200 for the Monroe Park office or 828-3964 for the MCV office. Visit [www.students.vcu.edu/counseling/](http://www.students.vcu.edu/counseling/) for more information.

If you prefer to pursue counseling services off-campus, talk to a Student Health provider. A case manager is also available through UCS to assist with off-campus referrals.

### **❖ MEDICATIONS**

A variety of medications are available for the treatment of GAD. This handout will focus on antidepressants and anti-anxiety drugs, the two most commonly used drug classes for GAD.

#### **ANTIDEPRESSANTS**

These medications were developed to treat depression but are also effective for anxiety disorders. The most commonly used class of antidepressants is called the **selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)**.

- SSRIs are safe to take and improve anxiety by gradually raising levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin in the brain.
- These medications must be taken on a daily basis in order to be effective.

#### **■ How soon will medication work?**

SSRIs begin to alter brain chemistry after the very first dose, but it usually takes a few weeks before symptoms begin to improve. Therefore, it is important to take your medication for at least a month before deciding if it is working for you.

#### **■ What are possible side effects?**

Side effects are not a problem for most people but may occur during the first 1-2 weeks of use.

- Common side effects include stomach upset, diarrhea, headache, and changes in sleep or appetite. These symptoms should be mild and disappear after a few weeks.
- Side effects are less common if the medication is started at a low dose and increased gradually.
- Consult your healthcare provider if you experience intolerable side effects or worsening anxiety.

**NOTE:** Some people develop an increase in suicidal thoughts while on antidepressants. If this happens to you, stop the medication and contact your healthcare provider immediately!

#### **■ For how long will I need medication?**

It is generally recommended that an effective medication be continued for at least 12 months after symptoms improve. Longer treatment courses are recommended for patients whose symptoms return after stopping an effective medication.

Unless you have serious side effects, do not stop antidepressant medications without consulting your medical provider!

- Sudden discontinuation may cause dizziness, muscle aches, agitation, sleep disturbances, and other bad reactions.
- Medications should be tapered gradually to prevent these symptoms from occurring.

#### **ANTI-ANXIETY DRUGS**

Benzodiazepines are a powerful class of medications that can decrease anxiety symptoms immediately. They are used as "rescue" medications for severe anxiety symptoms. Examples include clonazepam (Klonopin) and alprazolam (Xanax).

#### **■ What are possible side effects?**

Benzodiazepines are effective medications for anxiety, but they also carry an addictive potential. In addition, tolerance can occur with regular use, meaning that higher and higher doses will be needed to get the same effects. Therefore, we do not recommend benzodiazepines for regular or long-term use.

- These drugs are often used as a "bridge" to treat severe symptoms while starting an antidepressant and/or psychotherapy, which take time to work.
- These medications should be used sparingly, on an as-needed basis for severe anxiety symptoms.

Benzodiazepines can cause significant drowsiness. Therefore, do not take these medications:

- While driving or operating machinery.
- With other sedatives, including alcohol.

If you are advised to take benzodiazepines on a regular basis, do not stop taking these medications abruptly, as severe withdrawal symptoms can occur. It will be important to taper off these medications.