

What older adults, their families and friends need to know about...

# Anxiety

Feelings of anxiety can be normal and healthy, or they can indicate an anxiety problem. It's normal, for example, to feel afraid when a large dog snaps at you or to worry when a family member is several hours late and has not called. These feelings can help you to protect yourself and others you care about. Once the situation is resolved or changes, the fear or worry should go away. However, you may have an anxiety problem if your feelings of worry or fear:

- occur most of the time
- keep you awake at night
- prevent you from doing things during the day.

Anxiety problems in older adults are common, and they often go unrecognized.

Anxiety problems may be caused by:

- stressful or traumatic events
- alcohol, medications and caffeine
- family history of anxiety disorders
- other medical or psychiatric problems.

## Types of anxiety problems

Anxiety problems can take different forms. The following are some of the more common forms, listed in order of how often they are seen in older people.

**Generalized anxiety disorder:** where people worry often over a long period of time.

**Phobias:** where people fear a specific thing, such as going outside, heights or spiders.

**Posttraumatic stress disorder:** where intrusive memories, dreams or flashbacks cause people to relive the intense fear experienced during a traumatic experience, such as war, a violent assault or an accident.

**Panic disorder:** where people have episodes of extreme fear, often with physical symptoms, such as shortness of breath and chest pains.

**Obsessive-compulsive disorder:** where troubling uninvited thoughts, urges and images surface in the mind repeatedly and lead people to perform time-consuming rituals aimed at calming their distress.

## What are the signs of anxiety problems?

The worry and fear that comes with anxiety problems may cause people to avoid situations, things or people, even when they know that what they are feeling doesn't make sense. Anxiety may also cause them to feel physically ill. Signs that an older adult may have an anxiety problem include:

- irrational and excessive worry or fear
- checking and rechecking for safety
- avoiding routine activities
- avoiding social situations
- racing heart
- shallow breathing, trembling, nausea, sweating.

## What can I do about an anxiety problem?

People with anxiety problems are often aware that their fear is excessive, but are unable to control it.

Anxiety



problems can make it hard, if not impossible, to enjoy life. Fortunately, help is available. The first step is to rule out a physical problem by visiting a family doctor. If an anxiety problem is diagnosed, it can often be managed with a combination of counselling, medication and relaxation techniques.

There are other things that you can do to help ease an anxiety problem.

**Become an expert on your condition.** Learn about your condition, your symptoms and how to recognize when symptoms begin.

**Develop and stick to a plan for managing symptoms of anxiety.** Use skills learned in therapy to manage symptoms and take medications as prescribed.

**Develop a social support network.** Family, friends and a support group can help you to recognize when stressful situations may trigger anxiety symptoms, and can remind you of your strengths when you feel discouraged.

**Learn to cope with stress.** Stress, fatigue and feeling out of control can trigger symptoms of anxiety. Ways to manage stress include doing things that are relaxing, pleasurable or interesting to you. This can help to take your mind off the things that cause you stress and make them seem less important. Other ways to manage stress include breathing techniques, meditation and exercise.

**Live a healthy, well-balanced life.** Eating well, getting enough sleep and keeping active can all help you to manage stress and feel well. Faith, religion or spiritual practices can also help. Focus on developing a balance in your life, with time for family, friends, work or volunteer and leisure activities.

## Where can I get more information?

For information and referral to mental health services available in Ontario, contact the **Mental Health Service Information Ontario** toll free at **1 866 531-2600** or online at **www.mhsio.on.ca**. This free and confidential service is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Many resources on anxiety are available, including books, videos, support groups and websites. Two reliable sources of information are the **Anxiety Disorders Association of Canada, 1 888 223-2252, www.anxietycanada.ca** and the **Canadian Mental Health Association, Ontario, 1 800 875-6213, www.ontario.cmha.ca**. For more information on addiction and mental health issues, please contact CAMH's R. Samuel McLaughlin Information Centre:  
Ontario toll-free: 1 800 463-6273  
Toronto: 416 595-6111  
Or go to [www.camh.net](http://www.camh.net).