

Treating generalised anxiety disorder and panic disorder in adults

Information for the public
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www.nice.org.uk

About this information

NICE clinical guidelines advise the NHS on caring for people with specific conditions or diseases and the treatments they should receive. The information applies to people using the NHS in England and Wales.

This information explains the advice about treating generalised anxiety disorder (sometimes shortened to GAD) and panic disorder in adults that is set out in NICE clinical guideline 113.

This is an update of advice on the care of people with GAD or panic disorder that NICE produced in 2004 and amended in 2007. The advice on the treatment of GAD has been updated. The advice on the treatment of panic disorder has not been updated.

Does this information apply to me?

Yes, if you are:

- an adult (aged 18 and over) with GAD or panic disorder
- a family member or carer of an adult with GAD or panic disorder.

No, if you have other mental health problems such as depression (see www.nice.org.uk/CG90), bipolar disorder (see www.nice.org.uk/CG38), obsessive-compulsive disorder (see www.nice.org.uk/CG31) or post-traumatic stress disorder (see www.nice.org.uk/CG26).

Your care

If you think that your care does not match what is described in this information, please talk to a member of your healthcare team in the first instance.

In the NHS, patients and healthcare professionals have rights and responsibilities as set out in the NHS Constitution (www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-nhs-constitution-for-england). All NICE guidance is written to reflect these. You have the right to be involved in discussions and make informed decisions about your treatment and care with your healthcare team. Your choices are important and healthcare professionals should support these wherever possible. You should be treated with dignity and respect.

To help you make decisions, healthcare professionals should explain GAD and panic disorder and the possible treatments for them. They should cover possible benefits and risks related to your personal circumstances. You should be given relevant information that is suitable for you and reflects any religious, ethnic, or cultural needs you have. It should also take into account whether you have a physical or learning disability, sight or hearing problem or language difficulties. You should have access to an interpreter or advocate (someone who helps you put your views across) if needed.

If your family or carers are involved, they should be given their own information and support. If you agree, they should also have the chance to be involved in decisions about your care.

You should be able to discuss or review your care as your treatment progresses, or your circumstances change. This may include changing your mind about your treatment or care.

All treatment and care should be given with your informed consent. If, during the course of your illness, you are not able to make decisions about your care, your healthcare professionals have a duty to talk to your family or carers unless you have specifically asked them not to. Healthcare professionals should follow the Department of Health's advice on consent (www.gov.uk/government/publications/reference-guide-to-consent-for-examination-or-treatment-second-edition) and the code of practice for the Mental Capacity Act. Information about the Act and consent issues is available from www.nhs.uk/CarersDirect/moneyandlegal/legal. In Wales healthcare professionals should follow advice on consent from the Welsh Government (www.wales.nhs.uk/consent).

Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)

GAD is a common mental health problem, affecting 1 in every 25 people in the UK. The main symptoms of GAD are:

- having a number of different worries that are excessive and out of proportion to a particular situation
- having difficulty controlling one's worries.

Everyone feels anxious or worried sometimes, but having GAD means having uncontrollable anxieties or worries about a lot of different events and situations a lot of the time. People with GAD can find it difficult or stressful to carry out their daily activities. Sometimes people with GAD also have another mental health problem such as [depression](#).

Other symptoms of GAD include feeling irritable, restless, tired, having tense muscles and problems concentrating or sleeping. It can be difficult to recognise GAD so it is important that you talk to your GP or other healthcare professional if you have any of these symptoms and are worried or anxious a lot of the time.

As the worries and anxieties continue and get worse, the person may think they have a serious mental illness, such as [psychosis](#), but this is not the case.

What should happen when I see a healthcare professional about GAD?

When you see any healthcare professional about your symptoms, they should ask you

what kinds of worries you have, how you feel and how your worries are affecting your everyday life.

They may then ask you:

- whether any physical health problems are related to your worries and anxious feelings
- whether any treatments you have had before for GAD have helped you
- whether you have or have had any other mental health problem
- whether you have a problem with drugs or alcohol.

Your healthcare professional should respect your confidentiality, privacy and dignity at all times. They should build a relationship with you based on openness and understanding. Throughout your care they should discuss with you the treatment you would prefer.

You should also be told about local and national self-help groups, support groups and helplines for people with GAD where you can talk to people with similar experiences.

Questions you could ask your healthcare team

- What is GAD?
- What are the treatments for GAD?
- Who can provide my treatment?
- Who can I contact in a crisis?
- Do you have any information for my family/carers?

What treatments should I be offered for GAD?

Some treatments may not be suitable for you, depending on your exact circumstances. If you have questions about specific treatments and options covered, please talk to a member of your healthcare team.

Treatments for GAD include psychological treatments and medication. These are explained below. Most treatments can be provided by your GP or other healthcare professionals in primary care.

If you have a learning disability or other problem that may affect your understanding, you should be offered the same treatments as other people with GAD. The treatment may be adapted to suit your needs.

If you also have depression or another kind of anxiety disorder (such as obsessive-compulsive disorder or post-traumatic stress disorder), your healthcare professional should discuss with you which condition would be best treated first.

If you have problems with alcohol or drugs you may be offered treatment for your alcohol or drug problem first. This is because GAD sometimes gets better after an alcohol or drug problem is treated.

GAD may get better by itself with no treatment at all, or after discussions with and advice from a healthcare professional.

Initial treatments

If you decide to have treatment, you should first be offered one that you can either do on your own (self-help) or a course with other people. Both treatments should help you to understand your symptoms and develop ways of coping with them.

Self-help involves working from a book or a computer program for about 5 to 14 weeks. You should be given advice about how to use the book or program before you start. Some types of self-help involve very little contact with a healthcare professional; others involve meeting with or talking on the phone to a healthcare professional for a short time every week or fortnight.

If you choose to go on a course with other people you will have meetings every week for about 6 weeks. You may also be given a self-help book to work through.

If you do not think that initial treatment has helped you, you should be offered one of the further treatments described below.

Further treatments

If your symptoms are seriously affecting you, or the initial treatments have not helped you, or your symptoms are getting worse, you should be offered a psychological treatment (either one called cognitive behavioural therapy or one called applied relaxation), or medication.

Psychological treatments

Both cognitive behavioural therapy (sometimes shortened to CBT) and applied relaxation involve weekly meetings with a healthcare professional for about 3 to 4 months. CBT helps you to understand how your problems, thoughts, feelings and behaviour affect each other. It can also help you to question your negative and anxious thoughts, and do things you would usually avoid because they make you anxious.

Applied relaxation involves learning how to use muscle relaxation techniques when you are feeling anxious or in situations that could make you feel anxious. Your healthcare professional will help you to gradually encounter and cope with these situations.

You may be offered treatment in your preferred language if possible.

If you do not think that the course of CBT or applied relaxation has helped you, you should be offered medication.

Medication

If you would prefer to have medication rather than psychological treatment, or psychological treatment did not help you, you should be offered a type of antidepressant called a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (sometimes shortened to SSRI). Antidepressants can be an effective treatment for GAD – being offered an SSRI does not mean that you have depression.

If the first SSRI does not help you, or you have side effects that cause you problems, you should be offered a different SSRI or another type of antidepressant called a serotonin–noradrenaline reuptake inhibitor (sometimes shortened to SNRI). If antidepressants are not suitable for you, you may be offered pregabalin.

You should not usually be offered a benzodiazepine to treat GAD, except temporarily to

help you through crisis periods (for example, when your anxiety is very difficult to manage and you feel out of control). If you do take a benzodiazepine in a crisis it should only be for a short time.

You should not usually be offered an antipsychotic to treat GAD by your GP or other healthcare professional in primary care.

Your healthcare professional should discuss with you all the options for medication and any concerns you have about the medication. You should also be given full written information about taking medication. The information should explain:

- that when you first start taking an antidepressant you may feel more anxious and agitated, and may have problems sleeping and eating, but that this usually passes after a short time
- the side effects and the withdrawal symptoms that might occur when you stop taking the medication
- the likelihood of the medication for GAD affecting any other medication you are taking
- the importance of carefully following the instructions about taking your medication so that it works properly.

You should also be advised that medications you can buy without a prescription at a chemist may affect the way your medication for GAD works.

Your healthcare professional should check whether you have any side effects when you first start taking your medication. If you do, they should check to see whether these improve over time. The dose of your medication could be reduced, or you could try a different medication or a psychological treatment (see above) instead.

While you are taking medication your healthcare professional should see you every 2 to 4 weeks for the first 3 months, and every 3 months after that.

If you are under 30 and you are taking an antidepressant your healthcare professional should tell you that there is a small chance that you will have thoughts of harming yourself. Your healthcare professional should see you every week for the first month.

If the medication is working, you should keep taking it for at least a year because this can help you to stay well.

What happens if I don't feel better after psychological treatment or medication?

If the first course of treatment (CBT, applied relaxation or medication) does not help you, you should be offered one that you have not tried before.

If you are taking medication and it is helping, but you still have some symptoms, you may be offered a psychological treatment in addition to your medication.

If none of the treatments you have tried has helped you, you may be offered an appointment with a specialist (see below).

Questions you could ask your healthcare team

- Do I have a choice about which treatment I have?
- What will the treatment involve?
- What are the advantages, disadvantages and risks of this treatment?
- How long will it take for my medication to work?
- When should I start to feel better? What should happen if I don't start to feel better by then?
- Would it help to make changes to my current treatment?
- What other treatment options are there?

Specialist care

You may be offered a referral for specialist care if your symptoms are so severe and persistent that they make daily activities very difficult to carry out **and**:

- the treatments you have tried have not helped **or**
- you have a serious physical illness or another mental illness **or**

- you are harming yourself or having suicidal thoughts *or*
- you have a drug or alcohol problem.

In specialist care you will meet with a psychiatrist, a psychologist, a psychiatric nurse, an occupational therapist, or a healthcare professional with special experience in the care of people with GAD.

Your specialist should ask you the questions listed in ['What should happen when I see a healthcare professional about GAD?'](#). They should also ask you about your life at home and whether you have any support, whether you are looking after yourself properly and whether there is a chance that you might harm yourself.

The specialist should agree a plan for your care and treatment with you. As part of this plan you may be offered a treatment you have not tried before. This might be one of the psychological treatments or medications described in ['Further treatments'](#). You may be offered a combination of a psychological treatment with a medication, or a combination of two different medications. The advantages and disadvantages of the combination should be discussed with you before you agree to it.

Information for families and carers of people with GAD

Families and carers can play an important part in supporting a person with GAD. If a member of your family or someone you care for has GAD, their healthcare professional should ask them whether they would like you to be involved in their care. However, healthcare professionals should respect the privacy of the person with GAD if they would prefer to cope on their own.

If the person with GAD agrees to you being involved, you should be given information on GAD and how you can support them throughout treatment. You should also be given contact numbers of healthcare professionals and voluntary organisations, and information about what to do in a crisis.

As a family member or carer, you may need help and support yourself. Healthcare professionals should give you information about local family and carer support groups and other voluntary organisations, and help you to make contact with them.

Anyone with a caring role (that is, a person who provides regular and substantial care) has the right to a carer's assessment.

Questions families or carers could ask the healthcare team

- Am I entitled to be told about the treatment the person with GAD is having?
- What can I do to support the person?
- Can you give me any information about specialist support for families and carers, such as helplines?

Panic disorder

The main symptoms of panic disorder are attacks of intense fear and discomfort that happen unexpectedly and repeatedly. There may also be physical symptoms such as chest pain, sickness, dizziness, a racing heart beat, breathlessness, sweating or shaking. People with panic disorder may avoid situations that they think might lead to a panic attack. They may also fear or avoid public spaces (this is known as agoraphobia).

A person experiencing a panic attack may go to a hospital accident and emergency department mistakenly thinking they are having a heart attack because their heart rate is so high. If this happens to you, after the healthcare professionals have ruled out any physical cause of your symptoms, they should ask you about any previous treatment, give you information about panic disorder and advise you to see your GP. In most cases, you should not be admitted to hospital if you have had a panic attack.

What should happen when I see a healthcare professional about panic disorder?

When you first go to your GP or other healthcare professional, you should tell them about all of your symptoms and how long you have had them. Your healthcare professional may

ask you about your personal circumstances, your activities and any medication or other substances you are taking, including alcohol, caffeine or other drugs. They should discuss fully all of the options for treatment. You and your healthcare professional should then agree on your treatment plan.

Questions you could ask your healthcare team

- What is panic disorder?
- What are the treatments for panic disorder?
- Who can provide my treatment?
- Are there any support organisations for people with panic disorder in my local area?
- Who can I contact in a crisis?
- Do you have any information for my family/carers?

What treatments should I be offered for panic disorder?

Some treatments may not be suitable for you, depending on your exact circumstances. If you have questions about specific treatments and options covered, please talk to a member of your healthcare team.

Psychological treatment, medication and self-help have all been shown to be effective in treating panic disorder. Studies of different treatments found that the benefits of psychological treatment lasted the longest.

Different treatments will suit different people, so your healthcare professional should discuss the options with you. Whatever you decide, the chosen treatment should be available promptly.

During treatment you may be asked to complete a questionnaire at intervals to help you and your healthcare professional decide whether your symptoms are getting better.

Psychological treatment

If you decide to have psychological treatment, you should be offered cognitive behavioural therapy (which is sometimes shortened to CBT). CBT helps you to understand how your problems, thoughts, feelings and behaviour affect each other.

You should receive between 7 and 14 hours of treatment in total. This is usually provided as weekly sessions of 1–2 hours each, and the total treatment should be completed within 4 months.

During your CBT you should see your GP or other primary care health professional regularly to assess how you are doing.

Medication

If you are considering taking medication to treat your panic disorder, your healthcare professional should discuss with you:

- the risks of the different options
- whether you have tried medication for your panic disorder before and how well it worked for you
- possible interactions with other medications
- the potential side effects and what would and would not be tolerable for you.

If you and your healthcare professional decide on medication:

- You should be offered an antidepressant, which should be a type called a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (sometimes shortened to SSRI), licensed^[1] for the treatment of panic disorder. If that is not suitable for you, you should be offered imipramine or clomipramine (these belong to a group of medicines known as 'tricyclic antidepressants'). Although imipramine and clomipramine don't have a licence for use in the treatment of panic disorder, they have been shown to be effective^[1].
- You should not be prescribed a type of medication known as an antipsychotic, a sedative antihistamine or a benzodiazepine.

- When you are prescribed a medication, your healthcare professional should discuss with you how it will work and all of its potential side effects.
- Whichever medication your healthcare professional prescribes, you should be told that, although antidepressants are not addictive in the way alcohol or cigarettes can be, you might experience unpleasant symptoms (called 'discontinuation symptoms') when you stop taking it, miss a dose or reduce the dose.
- You should contact your healthcare professional if you experience discontinuation (withdrawal) symptoms that cause you concern.

Each time you start a new type of medication you should see your healthcare professional 2, 4, 6 and 12 weeks after starting the treatment so that you can both decide whether to continue or consider another treatment.

Self-help

There are many things you can do yourself that can be successful in reducing panic attacks. If you and your healthcare professional decide on self-help, you should be offered one or both of the following:

- access to support groups (sometimes run by people who have experienced panic disorder themselves)
- advice on exercise, which can improve mood.

During the self-help programme you should see your healthcare professional regularly, usually every 4–8 weeks.

What happens if I don't feel better after psychological treatment, medication or self-help?

If you have tried one type of treatment and it hasn't worked, your healthcare professional should discuss with you whether to try another type of treatment. (For example, if you have tried psychological treatment, your healthcare professional may offer you medication or self-help.)

If you have tried any two treatments (two of psychological treatment, medication or bibliotherapy) and you still have significant symptoms, your healthcare professional should

discuss with you whether you wish to have an appointment with a specialist.

Specialist care

In specialist care you may meet with a psychiatrist, a psychiatric nurse, a clinical psychologist, an occupational therapist or a social worker. The specialist may offer psychological treatment and/or medication.

The specialist should ask you:

- about previous treatments, including whether they worked and whether you completed the treatment as prescribed
- whether you use substances such as alcohol, caffeine or other drugs and whether you smoke
- about other diseases and conditions you have
- how much your symptoms are affecting your day-to-day life
- how much support you have from family and friends
- about things in your life that may be affecting your condition.

The specialist should then discuss the options with you and agree a plan for treatment. This may include any of the following:

- psychological treatment such as CBT (which you may be able to do at home if it is difficult for you to attend the clinic), if it has not been offered already, or a therapy known as structured problem solving
- treatment of other diseases and conditions that may be affecting your symptoms
- medications other than those you have already tried
- referral to highly specialised services.

Questions you could ask your healthcare team

- Do I have a choice about which treatment I have?
- What will the treatment involve?
- Can you give me a leaflet explaining the treatment?
- What are the advantages, disadvantages and risks of this treatment?
- How long will it take for my medication to work?
- When should I start to feel better? What should happen if I don't start to feel better by then?
- Would it help to make changes to my current treatment?
- What other treatment options are there?

^[1] When a drug is said to be 'licensed' for a specific condition, it means the drug is marketed and can be prescribed for that specific condition. Normally, a drug needs 'marketing authorisation' before it can be marketed or prescribed for a specific condition. The process of giving a medicine its marketing authorization is carried out by the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA). Further information on this is available from their website (www.mhra.gov.uk).

Information for families and carers of people with panic disorder

If a member of your family or someone you care for has panic disorder, you should be provided with information, if appropriate, about panic disorder and its treatment. The information should cover the use and possible side effects of medication for panic disorder.

You should also be told about self-help groups and support groups for families and carers of people with panic disorder, and if appropriate, encouraged to participate in programmes run by these groups.

If your family member or the person you care for is having specialist care for panic disorder, they may be offered a place at a day-care centre to relieve you during the day.

Questions families or carers could ask the healthcare team

- What can I do to support the person with panic disorder?
- Can you give me any information about specialist support for families and carers?

Explanation of technical terms

Antidepressant

Medication used to treat depression and also anxiety.

Antipsychotic

Medication used primarily in the treatment of [psychosis](#). Examples include aripiprazole, olanzapine, quetiapine and risperidone.

Benzodiazepine

Medication used to treat sleep problems, agitation, seizures and muscle spasms. Examples include chlordiazepoxide, diazepam and lorazepam.

Carer's assessment

An assessment by social services of a carer's physical and mental health and their needs in their role as a carer. Anyone aged 16 years and older who cares for someone on a regular and substantial basis has the right to request such an assessment. There should be a written carer's support plan, which is given to the carer.

Depression

A common mental health problem, the main symptoms of which are losing pleasure in things that were once enjoyable and losing interest in everyday activities and other people.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder

A type of anxiety disorder in which a person has thoughts, images or impulses that keep coming into their mind and are difficult to get rid of (called obsessions) and a strong feeling that they must carry out or repeat certain physical acts or mental processes (called compulsions).

Post-traumatic stress disorder

A type of anxiety disorder that can sometimes follow a threatening or traumatic event.

Pregabalin

A type of medication called an 'anticonvulsant' used to treat seizures, which is also used to treat GAD.

Primary care

A part of the healthcare service that includes GPs, nurses and mental health teams (such as mental health workers, mental health practitioners and psychologists).

Psychological treatments

Treatments that involve meeting with a mental health professional to talk about feelings and thoughts and how these affect behaviour and wellbeing.

Psychosis

A serious mental health problem. The main symptoms are hearing voices and sometimes seeing things that are not really there (called hallucinations), and having fixed beliefs that

are false but that the person believes in completely (called delusions).

Sedative antihistamine

Medication used to treat allergic reactions that can have a calming effect on the brain.

Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI)

A type of [antidepressant](#). Examples include sertraline, fluoxetine, citalopram, escitalopram, fluvoxamine and paroxetine.

Serotonin–noradrenaline reuptake inhibitor (SNRI)

A type of [antidepressant](#). Examples include venlafaxine and duloxetine.

Structured problem solving

An approach to solving problems that goes through several distinct steps: problem presented, problem negotiated, problem agreed, solution presented, solution negotiated, solution agreed.

More information

The organisations below can provide more information and support for people with generalised anxiety disorder. NICE is not responsible for the quality or accuracy of any information or advice provided by these organisations.

- Anxiety UK, 08444 775 774 www.anxietyuk.org.uk
- Mind, 0845 766 0163 www.mind.org.uk
- SANE, 0845 767 8000 www.sane.org.uk

You can also go to NHS Choices (www.nhs.uk) for more information.

Update information

July 2018: Because of the recent update to the guideline, a reference to bibliotherapy was no longer relevant so has been removed.

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Accreditation

