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Causes, Symptoms and Treatment of Anxiety Attacks

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Anxiety attacks are normal reactions to a threatening situation and results from an increase in the amount of adrenaline from the sympathetic nervous system. This increased adrenaline speeds the heart and respiration rate, raises blood pressure, and diverts blood flow to the muscles.

These physical reactions are appropriate for escaping from danger but when they cause anxiety in many situations throughout the day, they may be detrimental to a normal lifestyle. An anxiety disorder is a disorder where feelings of fear, apprehension, or anxiety are disruptive or cause distortions in behavior.

At times, an underlying illness or disease can cause persistent anxiety. Treatment of the illness or disease will stop the anxiety. Anxiety illnesses affect more than 23 million Americans with about 10 million Americans suffering from the most common, general anxiety disorder.

Panic attacks can begin with a feeling of intense terror followed by physical symptoms of anxiety. A panic attack is characterized by unpredictable attacks of severe anxiety with symptoms not related to any particular situation. The person experiencing the attack may not be aware of the cause.

Symptoms include four or more of the following: pounding heart, difficulty breathing, dizziness, chest pain, shaking, sweating, choking, nausea, depersonalization, numbness, fear of dying, flushes, fear of going crazy. Heredity, metabolic factors, hyperventilation, and psychological factors may contribute to anxiety causing panic attacks.

Panic disorder tends to run in families with first degree relatives of patients having four to seven times greater risk than the general population. Hyperventilation (rapid shallow breathing) can cause a decrease in carbon dioxide in the blood. This decrease in carbon dioxide has been associated with anxiety. Anxiety can be caused by psychological factors as well.

One theory is that there is an unconscious conflict between certain wishes and desires, and guilt associated with these desires. Another theory is that certain fearful childhood situations provoke anxiety later. This later theory has been associated with agoraphobia in that the fear of being abandoned in the past may lead to fear of public places.

Panic disorder is treated with drugs, cognitive- behavior therapy and other forms of psychotherapy, and/or a combination of the two. Relaxation therapy is also used in combination with other treatments.

Anxiety disorders oftentimes cannot be linked to specific life events and persist for months if not years at a time. Many people with anxiety disorders can be helped with treatment. Most of the medications which are prescribed are started at low doses and tapered off when treatment is near an end.

Side effects generally become tolerated or diminished with time. Behavioral therapy and cognitive-behavioral therapy can be effective for treating several of the anxiety disorders. Behavioral therapy focuses on changing specific actions and uses different techniques to alter unwanted behavior.

Techniques include special breathing exercises and exposure therapy - gradually exposing patients to what

frightens them and helps them cope with their fears. Cognitive-behavioral therapy teaches patients to react differently to the situations and bodily sensations that trigger panic attacks and other anxiety symptoms. Patients also learn to understand how to change their thoughts so that symptoms are less likely to occur. These techniques are designed to help people confront their fears. Without treatment, anxiety attacks can be extremely disabling and disrupt family, work and social relationships.

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