Information for Parents about Anxiety in Children and Teens

Fast Facts

- Fear and anxiety are a normal part of growing up, but they should not interfere with your child’s daily activities.
- Anxiety disorders are among the most common mental health problems in children and teens.
- Children and teens with anxiety experience severe and persistent distress that interferes with their daily functioning; often these disorders are under-diagnosed.
- You might describe your child as a “worrier.”
- Children and teens will often report physical complaints or describe “feeling sick” (e.g. stomach pain, headaches, chest pain, and fatigue).
- Many times, children with anxiety also are having problems with paying attention/staying focused at school; they may have problems being “moody.”
- Many times, healthcare providers will mistake anxiety symptoms for attention deficit symptoms.

Common Signs of Anxiety for Kids and Teens:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical</th>
<th>Behavioral</th>
<th>Thoughts</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Restlessness and irritability (very common in younger children)</td>
<td>Escape/avoidant behaviors</td>
<td>Worry about “what ifs…”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Headaches</td>
<td>Crying</td>
<td>Always thinking something terrible will happen</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stomachaches, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea</td>
<td>Clinging to/fear of separating from parents</td>
<td>Unreasonable, rigid thinking</td>
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<td>Feeling tired</td>
<td>Speaking in a soft voice</td>
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<td>Palpitations, increased heart rate, increased blood pressure</td>
<td>Variations in speech patterns</td>
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<td>Hyperventilation/shortness of breath</td>
<td>Nail-biting</td>
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<td>Muscle tension</td>
<td>Thumb-sucking</td>
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<td>Difficulty sleeping</td>
<td>Always “checking out” surroundings</td>
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<td>Dizziness, tingling fingers, weakness</td>
<td>Freezing</td>
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<td>Tremors</td>
<td>Regression (bedwetting, temper tantrums)</td>
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Medical Problems That Mimic Anxiety Symptoms

- Low blood sugar
- Thyroid problems
- Seizures
- Irregular heart beat
- Migraine headaches
- Breathing problems

Medications/Drugs That May Cause Anxiety Symptoms

- Caffeine
- Nicotine
- Antihistamines (Benadryl)
- Medications for asthma
- Marijuana
- Nasal decongestants, such as pseudoephedrine
- Stimulant medication (e.g., Ritalin)
- Street drugs (e.g., cocaine)
- Steroids
- Prescribed medications to treat anxiety, when started, can cause effects that mimic anxiety symptoms, but these symptoms often subside after a few days.

Treatment

- Talk to your primary care provider if you have concerns; describe what you are noticing about your child.
- Ask your primary care provider for things to read or Web sites to visit to learn more about your child's symptoms.
- Therapy might be recommended to help treat your child’s symptoms. It could involve individual, group, or family work.
- Consider what could be changed at home or in school to help your child deal with his or her worries (e.g., set a regular bedtime routine or think about which activities are stressful for your child and think about ways to handle them differently).
- Medication is often recommended as an alternative treatment if symptoms are disturbing your child's day-to-day activities. Your provider may recommend a class of medicines called “SSRIs, short for Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors.”
  - Be sure to ask:
    - What symptoms will the medication treat?
    - How long will my child have to take this medication?
    - How much medication will my child have to take, and how many times a day will he/she have to take it?
    - How often will we see and/or talk to you about how my child is doing on the medication?
    - What happens if my child misses a dose of medication?
    - How do we stop the medication?