

Gad

A plain-English guide for you and your family

WHAT IS HAPPENING

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) means you worry too much about everyday things — money, health, work, family — nearly every day for at least 6 months, and you cannot shut it off even when you try. Your brain's alarm center (the amygdala) and its brakes (the prefrontal cortex) stop working together the way they should, so the alarm keeps ringing even when there is no real threat. The chemical messengers that steady your mood — serotonin and norepinephrine — fall out of balance, so your worry circuit stays stuck on high. You feel restless, tired, grumpy, and cannot focus. Your muscles stay tight, especially in your neck, shoulders, and jaw. You cannot sleep well because your body thinks it is always under attack. None of this is your fault or weakness — it is a real medical condition caused by brain circuits misfiring. The good news: talk therapy (especially cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT) teaches your brain new ways to handle worry, and SSRI medicines (like sertraline or escitalopram) help rebalance serotonin so the alarm can quiet down. Most people get a lot better with treatment, and you do not have to live this way forever.

What you might feel

- Constant worry about many different things (work, health, family, money) that is hard to control
- Feeling restless, keyed up, or on edge
- Getting tired very easily, even without much activity
- Trouble concentrating or mind going blank
- Feeling irritable or easily annoyed
- Muscle tension, especially in the neck, shoulders, or jaw
- Trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or restless and unsatisfying sleep
- Physical symptoms like a racing heart, sweating, shaking, or upset stomach with no clear medical cause

Call the doctor right away if...

- New chest pain, trouble breathing, or a very fast or irregular heartbeat (could be a heart problem, not just anxiety)
- Sudden severe headache, confusion, or trouble speaking (could be a stroke or brain bleed)
- Thoughts of hurting yourself or ending your life (needs immediate safety evaluation)
- Weight loss, shaking hands, or heat intolerance with anxiety (could be hyperthyroidism, where the thyroid gland makes too much hormone and speeds everything up)
- Sudden episodes of terror with sweating, high blood pressure spikes, and headache (could be a pheochromocytoma, a rare tumor on the adrenal gland that dumps adrenaline into the blood)

What the care team will do

- Screen for suicidal thoughts using a direct question like 'Are you thinking of hurting yourself?' at every visit
- Check thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) level before starting anxiety medication if not done in the past year
- Teach the patient to track worry time in a journal, writing down the worry and what actually happened
- Review all current medications and supplements for stimulants, decongestants, or caffeine pills
- Schedule 20 to 30 minutes of aerobic exercise like brisk walking 5 days per week and follow up on adherence
- Educate that SSRIs or SNRIs take 4 to 6 weeks to work and early side effects like nausea or jitteriness usually resolve in 1 to 2 weeks
- Teach a simple box-breathing technique: breathe in for 4 counts, hold 4, out 4, hold 4, repeat 4 times
- Refer to a CBT therapist trained in GAD and confirm the first appointment is scheduled before the patient leaves

Medicines you may be given — and why

Sertraline (Zoloft) or Escitalopram (Lexapro)

These medicines are first-choice pills for long-term GAD control. Your brain uses a chemical messenger called serotonin to steady mood and turn down the volume on worry. Normally, after serotonin carries its calming message between nerve cells, it gets sucked back into the sending cell (reuptake) and the signal fades. SSRIs block that vacuum so more serotonin stays

in the gap between nerves, keeping the calming signal going longer. Over a few weeks, this steadies the alarm circuits in your brain so everyday worries don't set off a full panic alarm.

Venlafaxine (Effexor XR) or Duloxetine (Cymbalta)

SNRIs are another first-choice option, especially if an SSRI alone didn't help enough. They block the reuptake pumps for two brain messengers: serotonin (which steadies mood and worry) and norepinephrine (which helps you stay alert and focused). By keeping both messengers in the gap longer, SNRIs calm the overactive alarm circuits and also lift energy and motivation, which can dip when anxiety is constant.

Buspirone (BuSpar)

Buspirone is a non-sedating anxiety pill that works differently from SSRIs and SNRIs. It gently nudges serotonin receptors (the docking sites where serotonin lands) in worry circuits, helping to dial down the constant hum of background anxiety. It does NOT make you sleepy or addicted, so it's a good choice if you can't tolerate SSRIs/SNRIs or if one of those drugs helped but not quite enough. Buspirone takes 2 to 4 weeks to show its calming effect.

Lorazepam (Ativan), Clonazepam (Klonopin), or Alprazolam (Xanax)

Benzodiazepines are fast-acting calming pills that work within 20 to 60 minutes, making them useful for short-term rescue during a panic spike or the first few weeks while an SSRI/SNRI is building up. They boost GABA (the brain's main calming chemical) by making GABA receptors more sensitive. This quickly quiets overactive nerve firing in the amygdala and other worry circuits. However, your brain adapts to them within weeks, so they lose effectiveness and carry high risk of dependence if used daily for months. Guidelines say: use the lowest dose, for the shortest time, and always pair with therapy and a long-term medicine.

Hydroxyzine (Vistaril, Atarax)

Hydroxyzine is an antihistamine (allergy pill) that also has calming effects. It blocks histamine receptors in the brain; histamine is a wake-up chemical, so blocking it makes you feel drowsy and less on edge. It also has some effect on serotonin pathways. Hydroxyzine works within 30 to 60 minutes and is sometimes used short-term for anxiety when benzodiazepines are too risky (e.g., history of addiction) or as an add-on for sleep and physical tension. It is NOT addictive, but it does NOT treat the root cause of GAD and can make you very drowsy.

Propranolol (Inderal) or other beta-blockers

Propranolol is a heart medicine that also calms the physical symptoms of anxiety—racing heart, trembling hands, sweating—by blocking adrenaline's effects on the body. It does NOT cross into the brain much, so it does NOT reduce worry thoughts, but it stops the body's fight-or-flight response from spiraling. It's often used as needed before a stressful event (public

speaking, test) or as a short-term add-on if physical symptoms are severe. It works within 30 to 60 minutes.

Where this information comes from

- American Psychiatric Association DSM-5-TR (2022)
- APA Practice Guideline for the Treatment of Patients with Panic Disorder (2009, reaffirmed 2023)
- Cochrane Review: Psychological therapies for generalized anxiety disorder
- NICE Guideline: Generalised anxiety disorder and panic disorder in adults (2019, updated 2023)

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