

# Anxiety, panic attacks and hyperventilation syndrome

**Anxiety** is a term which describes a normal feeling people experience when faced with threat or danger, or when stressed.

When people become anxious, they typically feel upset, uncomfortable and tense.

Feelings of anxiety are caused by experiences of life, such as job loss, relationship breakdown, serious illness, major accident or the death of someone close. Feeling anxious is appropriate in these situations and usually we feel anxious for only a limited time. These feelings are not regarded as clinical anxiety, but are a part of everyday life.

## Panic Attacks

A Panic Attack is a sudden spell or attack when you felt frightened, anxious or very uneasy in a situation when most people would not feel afraid. During one of these attacks the following symptoms may occur:

- shortness of breath, a choking or smothering feeling
- pounding heart, trembling or shaking, "jelly legs"
- dizzy or light headed, feeling faint, blurred vision,
- tingling fingers or feet,
- tightness or pain in the chest, muscle tension
- sweating, dry mouth, hot or cold flushes, nausea or butterflies
- things around you feel unreal
- feeling you can't get your thoughts together or speak
- fear you might die, lose control or act in a crazy way

When the panic becomes severe most people try to get out of the particular situation, hoping the panic will stop. Alternatively, they get help because of fears they might collapse, have a heart attack, or go crazy. Occasionally, some people want to be alone so that they don't embarrass themselves in some way.

**Hyperventilation syndrome** - Many of the symptoms described above are due to overbreathing. If a person breathes too quickly, then the level of calcium in the bloodstream is temporarily altered and this alters nerve function.

Signs of overbreathing are:

- *Breathing too quickly?* The average person only needs to take 10-12 normal breaths per minute at rest. If your rate of breathing is greater than this then you must reduce it.
- *Breathing too deeply?* Does your chest sometimes feel over-expanded? You should breathe from the abdomen and through the nose, consciously attempting to breathe in a smooth and light way. Breathing through the mouth is a bad habit in most cases, and can be controlled by practice.
- Excessive sighing or yawning may be a sign of hyperventilation.

*Do you gasp or take in a deep breath when for example, someone suggests an outing or you hear the telephone ring?* Taking one deep breath can trigger the hyperventilation cycle in many people.

When individuals start associating panic attacks with certain situations, they often try to minimise the panic attacks by avoiding the same or similar situations. For example, some people who have their first panic attack on a train may start to avoid trains and buses in the future. When this avoidance is widespread and severe, the condition is called **Agoraphobia**.

We do not understand why, but the onset of agoraphobia is common between the ages of 15 and 20, or between 30 and 40. Many more women than men seek treatment.

See also - Anxiety & Depression resources: [www.nevdgp.org.au/depression.htm](http://www.nevdgp.org.au/depression.htm)

- Relaxation and Slow breathing exercises sheets
- Behavioral therapies sheet

Extracted from: Clinical Research Unit for Anxiety & Depression .. [www.crufad.org](http://www.crufad.org)  
and DHS Anxiety pamphlet -- [www.mentalhealthvic.org.au](http://www.mentalhealthvic.org.au)

\* All information is intended as a guide only and should be used in association with your health professional