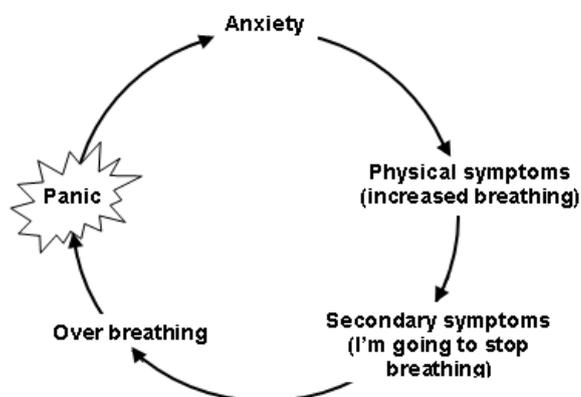


Anxiety

Anxiety attacks can happen to anyone but are very common in people who have a chronic lung disease.

An anxiety attack is defined as a “sudden onset of intense apprehension, fear or terror” and an attack is often accompanied by symptoms such as shortness of breath, dizziness, palpitations, chest pain, ‘butterflies’, dry mouth, shaking, sweating and feelings of unreality. The whole episode is very frightening to the person concerned, and thoughts such as “I am having a heart attack” or “I going to stop breathing” are very common. This creates more anxiety and starts a spiralling vicious cycle of negative thoughts and physical symptoms.



During times of stress or excitement our body activates a stress response that releases a hormone called 'adrenaline' to stimulate certain parts of the body. This response is commonly called 'fight or flight' and it enables us to face a dangerous situation or run away. This was extremely useful when we were cavemen (or cave ladies!), when dangerous life-threatening situations were common and we had to fend off wild animals. Many of the stresses we face today tend not to be life-threatening, such as money problems, work and ill health, but we still experience the same symptoms.

The reaction itself consists of the brain sending a message to pump adrenaline into the bloodstream. Blood is diverted to the essential organs of the body, the brain and the muscles, to make you more alert and to help you run. To do this blood is diverted away from non-essential organs, the stomach, bowels, and bladder, and this results in nausea, 'butterflies' and the feeling of wanting to pass water or open your bowels. Extra oxygen is needed so you breathe faster and the heart beats faster. As the body is working harder it needs to cool down, so you sweat and the blood capillaries come to the surface.

Hyperventilation (over breathing) can occur if you breathe too rapidly for the body's needs and the fine balance of carbon dioxide and oxygen in the blood is upset. This can result in symptoms of dizziness, 'pins and needles' and headaches.

The important thing to remember is that these physical symptoms are natural and not harmful.

The problem with anxiety attacks is that the fear reaction has become over-sensitive and is being triggered in apparently normal situations and your body cannot make sense of why you are feeling anxious, which increases the anxiety levels. This over-sensitivity of the fear reaction may be a result of a previous unpleasant experience and the body becomes expert in detecting subtle changes in your body that you would normally ignore. Shortness of breath can trigger anxiety, resulting in the breathlessness being exaggerated, leading to panic and the vicious cycle takes off.

Anxiety begins due to a combination of causes.

- The amount of stress you are under. You may have a single major problem or more likely a number of smaller problems which mount up. Being physically tired, run down and having many changes makes you more vulnerable to anxiety.
- The kind of person you are. Some people have a more sensitive, emotional nervous system and their body's arousal response might be triggered more quickly and take longer to calm down. Some people have learnt from past experiences how to get anxious and how to worry.

Anxiety and panic becomes a problem when it interferes with your everyday life.

Remember, anxiety is a normal reaction. You cannot banish it completely from your life but you can learn to manage it.

Learning to cope with anxiety

1. Try to remember that the symptoms of anxiety are normal. They are exaggerated reactions to stress and are not harmful.
2. Try to concentrate on the present, and do not think about what might happen.
3. Accept the feelings. Let them run through and they will disappear more quickly.
4. Consciously relax your tense muscles by using relaxation skills.
5. Concentrate on your breathing control and do not over-breathe.
6. Understand how anxious feelings persist because of a spiralling vicious cycle between physical symptoms and worrying thoughts.
7. Stay with the situation. If you run away, avoid or escape, it will be more difficult in the future.
8. Use distraction or diversion techniques. Focus on a particular object in the room and study it, recite multiplication tables or count backwards.
9. Practice relaxation and controlling your breathing when you are calm. This will make it easier to put into practice when you are feeling panicky.
10. Practice relaxation skills regularly to recharge your batteries, especially during periods of added stress, such as at Christmas time.

