

## How Worrying Affects Your Body

Are you an excessive worrier? Perhaps you subconsciously think that if you “worry enough,” you can prevent bad things from happening. But the fact is worrying can affect your body in ways that may surprise you. When worrying becomes excessive, it can lead to feelings of high anxiety and even cause you to be physically ill.

### What happens with excessive worrying?

Worrying is feeling uneasy or being overly concerned about a situation or problem. With excessive worrying, your mind and body go into overdrive as you constantly focus on “what might happen.”

In the midst of excessive worrying, you may suffer with high anxiety – even panic -- during all your waking hours. Many chronic worriers tell of feeling a sense of impending doom or unrealistic fears that only increase their worries. Ultra-sensitive to their environment and to the criticism of others, excessive worriers may see anything – and anyone – as a potential threat.

Chronic worrying affects your daily life so much that it interferes with your appetite, lifestyle habits, relationships, sleep, and job performance. Many people who worry excessively are so anxiety-ridden that they seek relief in harmful lifestyle habits such as overeating, eating junk food, cigarette smoking, or using alcohol and drugs.

### What is anxiety?

Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress. Ongoing anxiety, though, may be the result of a disorder such as generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, or social anxiety. Anxiety disorders are commonplace in the U.S., affecting nearly 40 million adults. Anxiety manifests itself in multiple ways and does not discriminate by age, gender or race.

Stressful events such as a test or a job interview can make anyone feel a bit anxious. And sometimes, a little worry or anxiety is helpful. It can help you get ready for an upcoming situation. For instance, if you're preparing for a job interview, a little worry or anxiety may push you to find out more about the position. Then you can present yourself more professionally to the potential employer. Worrying about a test may help you study more and be more prepared on test day.

But excessive worriers react quickly and intensely to these stressful situations or triggers. Even thinking about the situation can cause chronic worriers great distress and disability. Excessive worry or ongoing fear or anxiety is harmful when it becomes so irrational that you can't focus on

reality or think clearly. People with high anxiety have difficulty shaking their worries. When that happens, they may experience actual physical symptoms.

### Can excessive worrying and anxiety cause a stress response?

Stress comes from the demands and pressures we experience each day. Long lines at the grocery store, rush hour traffic, a phone ringing nonstop, or a chronic illness are all examples of things that can cause stress on a daily basis. When worries and anxiety become excessive, chances are you'll trigger the stress response.

There are two elements to the stress response. The first is the perception of the challenge. The second is an automatic physiological reaction called the "fight or flight" response that brings on a surge of adrenaline and sets your body on "red alert." There was a time when the "fight or flight" response protected our ancestors from such dangers as wild animals that could easily make a meal out of them. Although we don't ordinarily encounter wild animals we need to run from today, dangers still exist. They're there in the form of a demanding coworker, a colicky baby, or a dispute with a loved one.

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### Can excessive worrying make me physically ill?

Chronic worrying and emotional stress can trigger a host of health problems. The problem occurs when fight or flight is triggered daily by excessive worrying and anxiety. The fight or flight response causes the body's sympathetic nervous system to release stress hormones such as cortisol. These hormones can boost blood sugar levels and triglycerides (blood fats) that can be used by the body for fuel. The hormones also cause physical reactions such as:

- difficulty swallowing
- dizziness
- dry mouth
- fast heartbeat
- fatigue
- headaches
- inability to concentrate
- irritability
- muscle aches
- muscle tension

- nausea
- nervous energy
- rapid breathing
- shortness of breath
- sweating
- trembling and twitching

When the excessive fuel in the blood isn't used for physical activities, the chronic anxiety and outpouring of stress hormones can have serious physical consequences, including:

- suppression of the immune system
- digestive disorders
- muscle tension
- short-term memory loss
- premature coronary artery disease
- heart attack

In severe cases when excessive worrying and high anxiety go untreated, they can lead to depression and even suicidal thoughts.

Although these effects are a response to stress, stress is simply the trigger. Whether or not you become ill depends on how you handle stress. Physical responses to stress involve your immune system, your heart and blood vessels, and how certain glands in your body secrete hormones. These hormones help to regulate various functions in your body, such as brain function and nerve impulses.

All of these systems interact and are profoundly influenced by your coping style and your psychological state. It isn't the stress that makes you ill. Rather, it's the effect responses such as excessive worrying and anxiety have on these various interacting systems that can bring on the physical illness. There are things you can do, though, including lifestyle changes, to alter the way you respond.

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### What lifestyle changes might help excessive worriers?

Although excessive worrying and high anxiety can cause an imbalance in your body, there are many options you have that can re-establish harmony of mind, body, and spirit.

- **Talk to your doctor.** Start by talking with your primary care physician. Get a thorough physical examination to make sure other health problems are not fueling your feelings of anxiety. Your doctor may prescribe medication such as anti-anxiety drugs or antidepressants to help you self-manage your anxiety and excessive worrying.
- **Exercise daily.** With your doctor's approval, begin a regular exercise program. Without question, the chemicals produced during moderate exercise can be extremely beneficial in terms of enhancing the function of the immune system. Regular aerobic and strengthening exercise is also a very effective way to train your body to deal with stress under controlled circumstances.
- **Eat a healthy, balanced diet.** Stress and worrying provoke some people to eat too little, others too much, or to eat unhealthy foods. Keep your health in mind when worrying nudges you toward the fridge.
- **Drink caffeine in moderation.** Caffeine stimulates the nervous system, which can trigger adrenaline and make you feel nervous and jittery.
- **Be conscious of your worries.** Set aside 15 minutes each day where you allow yourself to focus on problems and fears -- and then vow to let them go after the 15 minutes is up. Some people wear a rubber band on their wrist and "pop" the rubber band if they find themselves going into their "worry mode." Do whatever you can to remind yourself to stop dwelling on worries.

- **Learn to relax.** Relaxation techniques can trigger the relaxation response -- a physiological state characterized by a feeling of warmth and quiet mental alertness. This is the opposite of the "fight or flight" response. Relaxation techniques can offer a real potential to reduce anxiety and worries. They can also increase your ability to self-manage stress. With relaxation, blood flow to the brain increases and brain waves shift from an alert, beta rhythm to a relaxed, alpha rhythm. Practiced regularly, relaxation techniques can counteract the debilitating effects of stress. Common relaxation techniques include deep abdominal breathing, meditation, listening to calming music, and activities like yoga and tai chi.
- **Meditate.** Daily meditation -- instead of worrying -- may help you move beyond negative thoughts and allow you to become "unstuck" from worries that keep your body on high alert. With meditation, you purposefully pay attention to what is happening at the present moment without thinking of the past or future. Meditation decreases hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline, which are released during the "fight or flight" or stress response.
- **Have a strong social network.** Loneliness may be as much a risk factor for disease as having high cholesterol or smoking cigarettes. People who are happily married and/or have large networks of friends not only have greater life expectancies compared with those people who do not, but

they also have fewer incidences of just about all types of disease.

- **Talk to a professional therapist.**

Psychological counseling can help you develop appropriate coping strategies to deal with issues that trigger excessive worrying. Psychological intervention can give you coping methods that you can use either within or outside other treatment programs. The therapist will help you identify what types of thoughts and beliefs cause the anxiety and then work with you to reduce them. The therapist can help you by suggesting ways that may help you change. But you have to be the one to make the changes. Therapy is only successful if you work on getting better.