

what is health anxiety?

Everyone, at some point or another, will notice sensations or changes in their bodies, will wonder whether they could have a serious medical problem, and will take steps to relieve their health worries and concerns. However, there is a difference between general health concerns, and more problematic health anxiety. Are you a person who finds that you worry a great deal about your health? Have you noticed that your effort to find answers for your symptoms is impacting on you in a negative way? If so, you may find the information in this sheet helpful in understanding what health anxiety is and its relevance to you.

What is health?

Health means different things to different people, but is generally regarded as a **person's state of physical, mental and social functioning**. Most definitions of health consider these three areas of functioning to be on a continuum ranging from very poor to excellent.



Health anxiety

Anxiety comes about at times when we think something bad might or will happen. This is actually a survival instinct and can be particularly helpful for us in real-life threatening situations. There are times however when we experience an anxiety response due simply to a *perceived threat*. For example, think of the anxiety one may feel walking down a poorly lit alley. The individual may feel anxious because they perceive some potential danger. This may not mean there is any real danger in walking down this particular alley, but what causes the experience of anxiety is that the person believes that they are in danger. If you *believe* there is some danger you will usually feel some level of anxiety.

Health anxiety refers to the experience of believing that there may be a threat to your health, which consequently triggers your anxiety response.

Some of the more common health related fears include having or developing cancer, Alzheimer's Disease, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, a mental illness such as schizophrenia, a thyroid disorder, or that you may have a heart attack. Not everyone thinks about specific problems though, your fears could be more general, in that you simply think that something is "not quite right".

In some cases, the fear we have may even be about the health of a loved one. For example, a parent who has noticed their child is tired frequently may become worried that their child has leukaemia, or a person who has noticed that their partner has been coughing frequently may begin to worry that they have lung cancer.



When is health anxiety a problem?

To a certain extent, milder forms of health anxiety can affect us all from time to time. Who hasn't been concerned when waiting for some test results to come back, or had some worrisome thoughts about a new lump or bump that we have noticed? So, at what point does mild health anxiety become a problem? Health concerns become problematic when they are:

- **excessive**,
- **out of proportion** to the realistic likelihood of having an actual and serious medical problem,
- **persistent** despite negative test results and/or reassurance from your health practitioner,
- leading to **unhelpful behaviours** such as excessive checking, reassurance seeking (e.g., from doctors, family or friends), or avoidance (e.g., of check-ups, doctors, health-related information), and
- causing you significant **distress**, or **impair** your ability to go about your day-to-day life.



But I have real symptoms!?!?

It is important to recognise that health anxiety can exist in people who are "healthy", in people who are experiencing real yet unexplained medical symptoms, and in people who have an existing and diagnosed medical condition. This means that the physical symptoms you experience that are at the centre of your health anxiety are not "all in your head".

Whether or not you have real symptoms or an actual medical condition is not the main issue when it comes to health anxiety. The issue is how you are responding to and coping with your symptoms or condition. If you respond to health issues or symptoms with excessive and persistent worrying, checking, reassurance seeking or avoidance, then health anxiety may still be a problem for you.