

# Easing Anxiety About Visiting the Doctor

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Fear of the unknown and anxiety are common reasons people give for putting off a visit to the doctor when a medical problem persists. But this avoidance strategy could be deadly if it's used to delay seeking attention for a serious medical problem.

Some anxiety is normal from time to time, but when it interferes with a person's daily life, it could mean an anxiety disorder is present. More than 40 million American adults have an anxiety disorder, according to The Anxiety and Depression Association of America, yet the prevalence of anxiety related to visiting the doctor has not been reported. It is difficult to get people with this type of fear to go to the doctor and to talk about their concerns.

## Sources of the anxiety

Peter Roy-Byrne, MD, professor emeritus of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of Washington School of Medicine, speculates the anxiety may be a manifestation of an already-occurring disorder such as:

- a specific phobia like blood/injury/illness phobia (uneasiness about the sight of blood or injury), social phobia or fear of pain
- panic disorder
- obsessive-compulsive disorder

Anxiety can come from other sources, too. In a 2011 California phone survey, 43 percent of respondents revealed that at least 1 barrier kept them from discussing depression symptoms with their primary care physician. Obstacles mentioned were:

- fear of being prescribed antidepressants (and fear of their side effects)
- belief that mental health issues were not part of their doctor's job
- fear of being labeled a psychiatric patient
- fears about medical record confidentiality

The Anxiety and Depression Association of America cites other reasons why a person may avoid seeking medical care:

- a bad past experience at a doctor visit, or hearing of a loved one's bad experience
- fear that he won't be able to remember what the doctor said during the visit
- fear that he won't be able to talk in front of the doctor
- fear of medical procedures (e.g., MRI, injections, having blood drawn)

## What you don't know can hurt you

If treatment for a condition is put off, the consequences could be dire. For example, "a person

having chest pain could be having a heart attack or they could be having an anxiety attack, but they shouldn't make that determination themselves," says Ross. "If the anxiety builds and you have to go for a physical, or you need tests or have symptoms of an illness, you have to know that ... you are making the problem worse by avoiding it."

### **What you can do to overcome your anxiety**

Dr. Roy-Byrne recommends education and gradual exposure to the situation to overcome anxiety about visiting the doctor. "You need to examine some of the beliefs you've had and understand that the beliefs are not correct," he says.

Another strategy might be to tell the receptionist when you schedule your appointment that you are anxious so the doctor knows this ahead of time.

Get as much information as you can in advance about a medical condition, procedure or the doctor. Then, make a list of questions to ask the doctor at your visit.

Having a family member, friend or therapist accompany you to the visit can help. Since it is often hard to remember things when you are nervous, you might ask that person to take notes for you.

If you are not satisfied with a diagnosis or the care you are receiving, or have difficulty communicating with your doctor, you might want to consider seeking a second medical opinion.

### **Resources**

*The Ross Center for Anxiety & Related Disorders* [www.rosscenter.com](http://www.rosscenter.com) *The Anxiety and Depression Association of America* [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org) *National Institute of Mental Health* [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

**By Amy Daugherty**

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Contact Us:

855-281-1601

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