

on Anxiety and women's health

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Anxiety is a feeling of worry, nervousness or fear that is a normal response to stress.¹ However, when these anxious feelings are persistent, interfere with daily life and are out of proportion to the reality of a situation, an anxiety disorder may be present.² One in three women, compared to one in five men will experience an anxiety disorder in their lifetime,³ and anxiety disorders are the leading contributor to the burden of disease in Australian girls and women aged five to 44.⁴

Types of anxiety disorders include generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social phobia and panic disorder. Anxiety disorder symptoms vary and can include:

- Psychological symptoms (frequent or excessive worry, specific fears or phobias, poor concentration);
- Physical symptoms (fatigue, sleeping difficulties, muscle tension, upset stomach and difficulty breathing); and
- Behavioural changes (procrastination, avoidance, indecision and social withdrawal).

Although there is a lack of recent Australian population data on the prevalence of anxiety disorders, a 2018 survey of over 15,000 of women aged over 18 found 46% of women reported being diagnosed with anxiety or depression.⁵

Worldwide, the rates of anxiety and other mental health conditions among adolescent girls are on the rise.⁶ In 2014, the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health found that 28% of women aged 18-23 reported a diagnosis of anxiety or depression.⁷

In Australia, studies and surveys on different cohorts return varying results. For example, a study of over 600 people who attended the 2016 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Fair Day found that 58% of lesbian, bisexual and queer women reported a diagnosis of an anxiety disorder, depression or other mental health condition.⁸ The 2014–15 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey found that 34% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women reported being diagnosed with a mental health condition, including anxiety.⁹

Women's higher likelihood of developing anxiety symptoms and related disorders are thought to arise from a combination of genetic, biological and socio-environmental factors.¹⁰

Addressing social factors such as exposure to poverty and violence, provides the greatest opportunity for anxiety prevention. For example, women who experience domestic violence are four times more likely to develop anxiety.¹¹ Low socioeconomic status is also associated with anxiety disorders.¹²

Anxiety can also impact physical health and vice versa. For example, women with Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) report higher prevalence of anxiety symptoms than women without PCOS.¹³ A history of comorbid depression and anxiety is a predictor of new onset heart disease in middle-aged women.¹⁴ Sleeping difficulties have been found to precede the development of anxiety and depression in young women.¹⁵ Anxiety is also linked to increased disability levels in women with multiple sclerosis.¹⁶

The relationship between depression and anxiety is complex and varies from person to person. Half of those with depression also experience anxiety. The relationship may be biological, however there is no evidence that one causes the other, and each disorder has its own causes and symptoms.¹⁷

While anxiety disorders are often recurring and long term, they can be managed with ongoing help from health professionals. Talk therapies, particularly cognitive behavioural therapy with trained therapists, have been identified as effective in managing anxiety disorders.¹⁸ However women report that cost is a major barrier to accessing these treatments.¹⁹ Medications, including some antidepressants, are sometimes prescribed to treat severe anxiety symptoms. Self-help treatment and lifestyle changes are recommended to manage mild symptoms.¹⁸ Recent research recommends sex-specific treatment that considers the role of female reproductive hormones.²⁰ Real and perceived stigma around anxiety can reduce the chance that those experiencing anxiety will seek help. However, a study by Beyond Blue found that the Australian population is more accepting of anxiety conditions than many believe.²¹

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WHV thanks the following expert reviewers for their input:

- Betsy Taylor, Director of Clinical Services at Jean Hailes for Women's Health
- Gillian Needleman, psychologist at Jean Hailes for Women's Health

Overview

[Signs and symptoms of anxiety](#) Jean Hailes for Women's Health, 2019 – *updated 09/20*

[Types of anxiety disorders](#) Jean Hailes for Women's Health, 2019

[Anxiety: Why the gender gap in Australia's most common mental illness?](#) ABC Online, 2018

[Anxiety disorders among women: a female lifespan approach](#) *Focus (American Psychiatric Publishing)*, 2017

[Australians understand depression, so why don't we 'get' anxiety?](#) *The Conversation*, 2015

Influence of sex and gender

[Sex hormones and gender vulnerabilities to anxiety disorders](#) *Psychiatric Times*, 2018

[Sex and gender differences in post-traumatic stress disorder: an update](#) *European Journal of Psychotraumatology*, 2017

[Maternal anxiety disorders in the postnatal period : what do we know?](#) *The Mental Elf [Blog]*, 2016

[Differences in social anxiety between men and women across 18 countries](#) *Personality and Individual Differences*, 2014

[Gender differences in anxiety disorders: prevalence, course of illness, comorbidity and burden of illness](#) *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 2011

Trends and cohorts

[A systematic review of reviews on the prevalence of anxiety disorders in adult populations](#) *Brain and Behaviour*, 2016 - [NHS explainer of the research](#)

[Mental and behavioural conditions: anxiety-related conditions](#) *In: 4364.0.55.001: National Health Survey: first results, ABS, 2015*

[Chapter 4. Anxiety disorders](#) *In: The mental health of children and adolescents: report on the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing* AIHW, 2015, pp. 41-47

[Are child and adolescent mental health problems increasing in the 21st century? a systematic review](#) *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 2014

Drivers

[Sexual assault victims more likely to have anxiety and depression: study](#) *The Guardian*, 2018

[Socioeconomic deprivation and non-suicidal self-injury in New Zealand adolescents: the mediating role of depression and anxiety](#) *New Zealand Journal of Psychology*, 2017

[Increased prevalence of anxiety symptoms in women with polycystic ovary syndrome: systematic review and meta-analysis](#) *Fertility and Sterility*, 2012

[Racism as a determinant of social and emotional wellbeing for Aboriginal Australian youth](#) *Medical Journal of Australia*, 2011

Prevention

[A strong sense of coherence associated with reduced risk of anxiety disorder among women in disadvantaged circumstances \[UK\]](#) *BMJ Open*, 2018

[Effectiveness of psychological and/or educational interventions in the prevention of anxiety: A systematic review, meta-analysis, and meta-regression](#) *JAMA Psychiatry*, 2017

[Prevention of depression and anxiety in Australian schools](#) Black Dog Institute, 2016

Women's experience

[Women's experiences with postpartum anxiety disorders: a narrative literature review](#) *International Journal of Women's Health*, 2017

[17 women reveal what it's really like to live with an anxiety disorder \[U.S.\]](#) *Hello Giggles*, 2018

[Anxiety disorders: blogs and stories \[U.K.\]](#) Time to Change, 2019

[Women's preferences for treatment of perinatal depression and anxiety: discrete choice experiment](#) *PLOS One*, 2016

Policy

[Mental Health Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System](#) Victoria. Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2019

[The Fifth national mental health and suicide prevention plan](#) Australia. Department of Health, 2017 and [Progress report 2018](#); [Progress report 2019](#) National Mental Health Commission, 2019 - *updated 09/20*

[Victoria's 10-year mental health plan](#) Victoria. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015

[Victoria's mental health services annual report 2018-19](#) Victoria. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019 - *updated 09/20*

Resources for individuals

[Health topics: Anxiety](#) Jean Hailes for Women's Health, 2019 - *updated 09/20*

[Women's Mental Health Network Victoria](#)

[Anxiety Disorders Association of Victoria](#)

[How are you going? mental health checklists for expecting and new mums and dads](#) PANDA 2018

[A guide to what works for anxiety](#) Beyond Blue, 2013

Resources for health professionals

[Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists clinical practice guidelines for the treatment of panic disorder, social anxiety disorder and generalised anxiety disorder](#) *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 2018

[National perinatal mental health guideline](#) Centre of Perinatal Excellence (COPE), 2017

[e-Mental health for mood and anxiety disorders in general practice](#) *Australian Family Physician*, 2014

List of supports

[Lifeline](#) 13 11 14
[beyondblue](#) 1300 22 4636
[Kids Helpline](#) 1800 55 1800
[headspace](#) National Youth Mental Health Foundation
[ehespace](#) Online support for young people and their families
[Australian Psychological Society](#) For the public: find a psychologist

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