

Screening for Anxiety Disorders in Adults

People with anxiety disorders often feel worried or afraid.

What Is Anxiety?

It is normal for people to feel anxious at times. However, the term *anxiety disorder* refers to when these feelings become strong and persistent and lead to problems in performing everyday tasks at home and at work. Anxiety disorders can include generalized anxiety, separation anxiety, social anxiety, and specific fears (phobias). People with anxiety symptoms should be evaluated and treated, as untreated anxiety negatively affects one's quality of life. Treatment for anxiety disorders includes psychotherapy (talk therapy) and medications such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs).

Screening for Anxiety Disorders

The term *screening* means looking for a condition or illness in individuals who do not have specific symptoms or concerns related to that illness.

Screening for anxiety disorders is important because often patients do not feel comfortable bringing up anxiety symptoms with their doctor, especially during a routine checkup. It may only be when they are specifically asked about symptoms that the problem comes to light.

Patients can be screened for anxiety disorders in a clinical setting using questionnaires. A commonly used screening questionnaire is the 7-Item Generalized Anxiety Disorder questionnaire (GAD-7). These 7 questions ask about

- Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge
- Not being able to stop or control worrying
- Worrying too much about different things
- Trouble relaxing
- Being so restless that it is hard to sit still
- Becoming easily annoyed or irritable
- Feeling afraid, as if something awful might happen

Other questionnaires include the Geriatric Anxiety Scale (GAS), the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS) anxiety subscale, and the Patient Health Questionnaire Panic Disorder (PHQ-PD) questionnaire.

Pros and Cons of Screening for Anxiety Disorders

One might naturally presume that screening would be beneficial, but the reality is that sometimes looking for problems when there are no concerns or symptoms can be harmful. Therefore, it is important to carefully weigh the pros and cons of screening.

Pros of screening include earlier detection and treatment of anxiety symptoms. Studies provide evidence that screening questionnaires can accurately identify an anxiety disorder and that treatment can lead to improvement or remission of symptoms. There is

People with anxiety disorders have persistent and/or intense feelings of fear, dread, or uneasiness that interfere with daily life.

US Preventive Services Task Force Recommendation

The USPSTF recommends screening for anxiety in adults, including pregnant and postpartum individuals. There is currently not enough evidence to say whether screening for anxiety in adults aged 65 years or older is beneficial.

Clinicians use a questionnaire to screen for anxiety. Patients with a positive screening should have a follow-up assessment to confirm the diagnosis of anxiety. Treatment of anxiety in adults includes

- Lifestyle changes such as increasing exercise, improving sleep habits, and addressing underlying health conditions
- Psychotherapy including cognitive behavior therapy (CBT) and interpersonal and family, relaxation, and desensitization therapies
- Antianxiety medication



no direct evidence linking screening for anxiety in the primary care setting to improved quality of life or remission of symptoms.

Cons of screening include false-positive results that may lead to unnecessary referrals, labeling, and stigma. While psychotherapy has little to no potential harm, the use of medications may have side effects.

Should You Be Screened for Anxiety Disorders?

The US Preventive Services Task Force recommends screening for anxiety in adults aged 19 to 64 years, including pregnant and postpartum individuals. The evidence on screening in adults older than 65 years is still unclear.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

US Preventive Services Task Force
www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/uspstf/topic_search_results?topic_status=P

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