Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

A guide for children, teens, and caregivers



Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) involves frequent, hard-to-control worry about several parts of life, such as school, friendships, health, or the future. Worries feel bigger than the situation and interfere with daily activities. All children worry sometimes; a diagnosis considers the child's age, development, symptoms, and how much those worries affect everyday life.

Common symptoms

- Hard-to-control worries about school, friends, or family
- Frequent reassurance seeking or fear of mistakes
- Restlessness, irritability, or poor concentration
- Trouble sleeping or daytime tiredness
- Headaches, stomachaches, or tension

Why does it happen?

Genes, temperament, and stressful experiences can contribute to anxiety. Usually several factors are involved; no single cause explains every case. Children and caregivers are not to blame.

Treatment and outlook

An assessment considers development, health, bullying, trauma, and other possible causes. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) helps a child understand worry and gradually practice feared but safe activities. Parents learn how to support practice without letting worry control the family's routine.

Medication may be considered when anxiety substantially disrupts life or therapy alone is not enough. The choice depends on the child's age, needs, preferences, and the medicine's evidence. Some uses are off-label; ask the prescriber to explain.

If an antidepressant is used, keep follow-up appointments and report worsening mood, agitation, or suicidal thoughts promptly, especially early in treatment or after a dose change.

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Living with GAD

Practical steps between appointments



Home and school

Respond calmly. Listen, name the worry, and help your child use a coping skill instead of offering endless reassurance.

Practice small steps. Agree on safe challenges together. Praise effort, and ask the therapist how to reduce avoidance.

Keep routines steady. Plan sleep, meals, and enjoyable activities. Practice slow breathing when calm. Work with school on support.

When to seek help

Seek help when worry disrupts sleep, school, friendships, or family life.

Report ongoing pain, missed school, and mood changes. Teens can ask to speak privately with a clinician.

Get urgent help

For suicidal thoughts or a mental health crisis, call or text **988** in the US. Call **911** for immediate danger or a life-threatening emergency. Children and teens: tell a trusted adult right away.

For your next appointment

Which worries lead to reassurance seeking or missed activities? What small practice step is manageable? Bring notes on school attendance, sleep, medicine effects, and what your child wants help with.

Learn more

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Sources and References

1. **Clinical Practice Guideline for the Assessment and Treatment of Children and Adolescents With Anxiety Disorders**
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