

Anxiety and Your Health



It's Understandable

Anxiety is such a common issue in the general population. But it's more common in people with heart or lung problems.

It makes sense when you think about it. If you have heart issues, you may have gone through the trauma of surgery or suffered a heart attack. These can be scary things that make it hard to simply forget about how fragile our health can be. If you have lung problems, you no doubt know the shaky feeling that comes with low oxygen levels or just the struggle to catch your breath during normal activities.

What Science Tells Us

Anxiety independently helps to predict the likelihood of developing heart attacks.

Journal of American College of Cardiology. 2008 ;51(2):113-9

Older women with panic attacks are more likely to develop heart disease.

Archives of General Psychiatry. 2007 Oct;64(10):1153-60

Patients who maintain a high level of anxiety after a diagnosis of heart disease are more likely to have a heart attack or die sooner.

Journal of American College Cardiology. 2007;49(20):2021-7

Signs of Anxiety

But anxiety is also known to have more subtle effects on us. For example, we might feel restless, irritable, easily frustrated, or have trouble sleeping. We might also have trouble concentrating and feel a lot of worry and tension. In more extreme forms we can experience anxiety attacks that can feel like a heart attack. These are all signs of an underlying anxiety problem.



Help Is Easy

Learning behavioral strategies for changing your breathing, relaxing your muscles, reducing tension, and changing unpleasant thoughts really makes a big difference. These simple techniques can be learned easily and quickly with help from a mental health professional, such as a psychologist or counselor. These specialists will help you learn how to have relief from anxiousness or restlessness.

Sometimes medication makes a positive contribution too. There are only a few anti-anxiety medications available, however. And they all tend to cause some significant drowsiness and can be habit forming. So taking medications for anxiety, while perhaps necessary, should be done cautiously and with the help of both a physician and a psychologist.

Ask your rehab staff for a referral to a local psychologist or counselor and whether a medical evaluation might be needed for possible medications. If your program has a mental health professional on staff, make good use of the available times to learn to cope with anxiety.

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