

## Specific Phobias



The Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA) is a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote the prevention, treatment, and cure of anxiety disorders and to improve the lives of all people who suffer from them. Help ADAA help others. Donate now at [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org).

For information visit [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org) or contact

Anxiety Disorders Association of America  
8730 Georgia Ave., Suite 600  
Silver Spring, MD 20910

Phone: 240-485-1001

“Everyone thinks that once I’ve driven on the highway, I’ve conquered it. They just don’t understand... I don’t understand. It’s a day-in and day-out struggle.”

## About Anxiety Disorders

### What is a phobia?

We all have things that frighten us or make us uneasy. New places, insects, driving over high bridges, or creaky elevators. And although we sometimes try to avoid things that make us uncomfortable, we generally manage to control our fears and carry on with daily activities. Some people, however, have very strong irrational, involuntary fear reactions that lead them to avoid common everyday places, situations, or objects even though they know logically there isn't any danger. The fear doesn't make any sense, but it seems nothing can stop it. When confronted with the feared situation, they may even have a panic attack, a spontaneous onset of intense fear that makes people feel as if they might stop breathing and pass out, are having a heart attack, or will lose control and die.

People who experience these seemingly out-of-control fears have a phobia. There are three types of phobias – agoraphobia, social phobia (also known as social anxiety disorder), and specific phobias. This brochure focuses on specific phobias. For information about agoraphobia and social phobia, visit [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org).

### What is a specific phobia?

People with a specific phobia have an excessive and unreasonable fear in the presence of or in anticipation of a specific object, place, or situation. Common specific phobias include animals, insects, heights, thunder, driving, public transportation, flying, dental or medical procedures, and elevators. A person with a phobia realizes that the fear is irrational, but even thinking about it can cause extreme anxiety.

Anxiety is normal. It helps us get out of harm's way and prepare for important events, and it warns us when we need to take action. But if you have anxiety that is persistent, irrational, and overwhelming and interferes with daily activities, you may have an anxiety disorder.

The term "anxiety disorders" refers to generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social anxiety disorder, and specific phobias.

For more information, visit [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org).

### What's the difference between normal anxiety and a phobia?

#### Normal Anxiety

Feeling queasy while climbing a tall ladder

Worrying about taking off in an airplane during a lightning storm

Feeling anxious around your neighbor's pit bull

#### Phobia

Refusing to attend your best friend's wedding because it's on the 25th floor of a hotel

Turning down a big promotion because it involves air travel

Avoiding visiting your neighbors for fear of seeing a dog



“so relieved when my doctor put a name to my problem, to discover that there are other people like me, to learn that there is hope.”

## How can specific phobias affect your life?

The impact of a phobia on your life depends on how easy it is to avoid the feared object, place, or situation. Since individuals do whatever they can to avoid the uncomfortable and often terrifying feelings of phobic anxiety, phobias can disrupt daily routines, limit work efficiency, reduce self-esteem, and place a strain on relationships.

## What causes specific phobias?

Specific phobias are the most common type of anxiety disorder, affecting 19 million American adults. Most phobias seem to come out of the blue, usually arising in childhood or early adulthood. Scientists believe that phobias can be traced to a combination of genetic tendencies, brain chemistry and other biological, psychological, and environmental factors.

## What treatments are available?

Most individuals who seek treatment for phobias and other anxiety disorders see significant improvement and enjoy a better quality of life. A variety of treatment options exists, including cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), exposure therapy, anxiety management, relaxation techniques, and medications. One or a combination of these may be recommended. Details about these treatments are available on the ADAA website at [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org).

There is no single best treatment. What works for one person may not be the best choice for someone else. A course of treatment should be tailored to individual needs. Ask your doctor to explain why a particular type of treatment is being recommended, what other options are available, and what you need to do to fully participate in your recovery.

## How can ADAA help you?

Suffering from a specific phobia or any anxiety disorder can interfere with many aspects of your life. You may feel alone, embarrassed, or frightened. ADAA can provide the resources that will help you and your loved ones better understand your condition, connect you with a community of people who know what you are experiencing, and assist you in finding local mental health professionals. Visit the ADAA website at [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org) to locate mental health professionals who treat phobias and other anxiety disorders in your area, as well as local support groups. Learn about the causes, symptoms, and best treatments for anxiety disorders, review questions to ask a therapist or doctor, and find helpful materials for family and loved ones. ADAA is here to help you make good decisions so that you can get on with your life.

# Take Five & Manage Your Anxiety

You are not alone. Talk to someone – a friend, loved one, or doctor. Get help. Anxiety disorders are real, serious, and treatable.

Whether you have normal anxiety or an anxiety disorder, these strategies will help you cope:

Exercise.  
Go for a walk or jog.  
Do yoga.  
Dance. Just get moving!

Talk to someone ... spouse, significant other, friend, child, or doctor.

Keep a daily journal.  
Become aware of what triggers your anxiety.

Eat a balanced diet. Don't skip meals. Avoid caffeine, which can trigger anxiety symptoms.

Visit ADAA at [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org).  
Let us help you help yourself.

## Specific Phobias Self-Test

If you think you might have a specific phobia, take the test below. Answer "yes" or "no" to the questions and discuss the results with your doctor.

### Are you troubled by...

- Y  N Fear of places or situations where getting help or escape might be difficult, such as in a crowd or on a bridge?
- Y  N Shortness of breath or a racing heart for no apparent reason when confronting certain situations?
- Y  N Persistent and unreasonable fear of an object or situation, such as flying, heights, animals, blood, etc.?
- Y  N Being unable to travel alone?
- Y  N Fears that continue despite causing problems for you or your loved ones?
- Y  N Fear that interferes with your daily life?

Having more than one illness at the same time can make it difficult to diagnose and treat the different conditions. Conditions that sometimes complicate anxiety disorders include depression and substance abuse, among others. The following information will help your health care professional in evaluating you for a specific phobia.

### In the last year, have you experienced...

- Y  N Changes in sleeping or eating habits?
- Y  N Feeling sad or depressed more days than not?
- Y  N A disinterest in life more days than not?
- Y  N A feeling of worthlessness or guilt more days than not?

### During the last year, has your use of alcohol or drugs...

- Y  N Resulted in failure at work or school or difficulties with your family?
- Y  N Placed you in a dangerous situation, such as driving under the influence?
- Y  N Gotten you arrested?
- Y  N Continued despite causing problems for you or your loved ones?