Health anxiety in one page

What it is

What is health anxiety?

Health anxiety is a lasting fear that you have, or will get, a serious illness, even after tests and doctors say you are well. It is a recognised anxiety condition, also called hypochondria. The fear is real, and it responds to treatment.

- Health anxiety is a lasting fear of serious illness
- Normal test results bring only short relief
- Its old name was hypochondria

The signs

What are the symptoms of health anxiety?

Health anxiety shows up as constant worry about having a serious illness, checking your body, searching symptoms online, and asking for tests or reassurance that never settles you. Some people do the opposite and avoid doctors altogether. It disturbs sleep and fills your days.

- Constant worry about having a serious illness
- Checking your body and searching symptoms online
- Reassurance from a doctor does not last

How a diagnosis happens

How do I get help for health anxiety?

There's no single health anxiety clinic in Australia, and no official clinical guideline for it either. Your GP is still the right place to start: they can assess you, rule out anything urgent, and refer you to a psychologist or a specific treatment program. Australian researchers, particularly at UNSW and the Black Dog Institute, do much of the world's work on this condition.

- No single Australian guideline exists yet
- A 2018 guideline gives health anxiety one line
- Much of the world's research happens here

Treatment

Does CBT work for health anxiety?

Yes: cognitive behavioural therapy adapted for health anxiety is the treatment with the most consistent evidence behind it, and it helps at a similar rate whichever specific diagnosis you've been given, illness anxiety disorder, somatic symptom disorder, or the older term hypochondriasis. Researchers keep finding the label matters less than getting the right kind of therapy.

- CBT is the treatment with strongest evidence

Medication

How well does medication work?

The evidence for medication in health anxiety is limited: a small number of trials, none very large, and no Australian or international guideline that recommends a specific drug. The most-quoted pooled result for SSRIs is modest and only just statistically significant. This does not mean medication cannot help, but the proof is thinner than for many other anxiety conditions.

- No guideline recommends medication here

What it costs

What does a psychologist cost?

There is no single price. Each psychologist sets their own fee, so the cost of a session varies from clinic to clinic. A Medicare rebate can bring the price down if your GP refers you, and private health insurance extras cover may help too, but most people still pay a gap on top. Ask for the fee schedule before you book.

- Psychologist fees vary practice to practice

Some of this differs by state and territory. See the pages on your state at haihealth.au/blog/health-anxiety.

In danger? Call 000. Lifeline 13 11 14, text 0477 13 11 14, or chat online.

Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467. Free counselling by phone or video, any hour.

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