

## The Physical Effects of Anxiety

When we are anxious our whole body becomes aroused and prepares itself for action.

This automatic response (to a real or imagined threat) is often known as the 'fight or flight' response (there is a separate leaflet on the Fight / Flight response). When in this aroused state many natural bodily changes occur. These changes are designed to allow us to either fight or to run away if faced with real threat or danger, for example crossing a road when a bus is approaching. Therefore this is normal and useful to our basic survival. It can become unhelpful when we react in this way to an imagined threat, for example going shopping in a supermarket and thinking that everyone is looking at us and thinking negative thoughts about us.



When we are anxious, our body releases a hormone called adrenaline into our blood stream. Below are a few examples of what adrenaline can cause:

- > Our heartbeat can increase so that more oxygen can be supplied to the muscles.
- > Our rate of breathing can increase so that we have more oxygen to prepare us for action (i.e. to 'fight or flight').
- > Sweating occurs because the body requires an efficient cooling system.
- > Our senses such as hearing and sight sharpen and become more sensitive. As a result any slight change is exaggerated.
- > Our blood is diverted away from our digestive system to our muscles, so we may experience 'butterflies' in our stomach.
- > We may overbreathe (hyperventilate) which can lead to feelings of dizziness and tingling in our fingers. When we hyperventilate we feel as though we are having breathing difficulties, when actually we are getting too much oxygen. This hyperventilation can in itself make the other symptoms worse.

Although these bodily changes are normal, they may feel uncomfortable and frightening if this automatic 'fight or flight' response occurs in an inappropriate situation (i.e. when there is no physical necessity for these bodily changes).

There are many different physical symptoms of anxiety, all of which can be unpleasant.

Although they are not dangerous, they can make us feel very tired. If we imagine the many physical changes happening in our body, it is not surprising that we feel tired.

After a period of prolonged anxiety, we can feel physically and mentally exhausted.

Sometimes we can misinterpret physical symptoms of anxiety as meaning that something is seriously wrong. For example, we may think that a feeling of pain in our chest is a sign of us having a heart attack. These misinterpretations in our thinking can lead to what is known as a panic attack (if you suffer from panic attacks, ask your guide for the leaflet '*Panic Attacks*'). This shows how our thoughts affect the way we feel both emotionally and physically.

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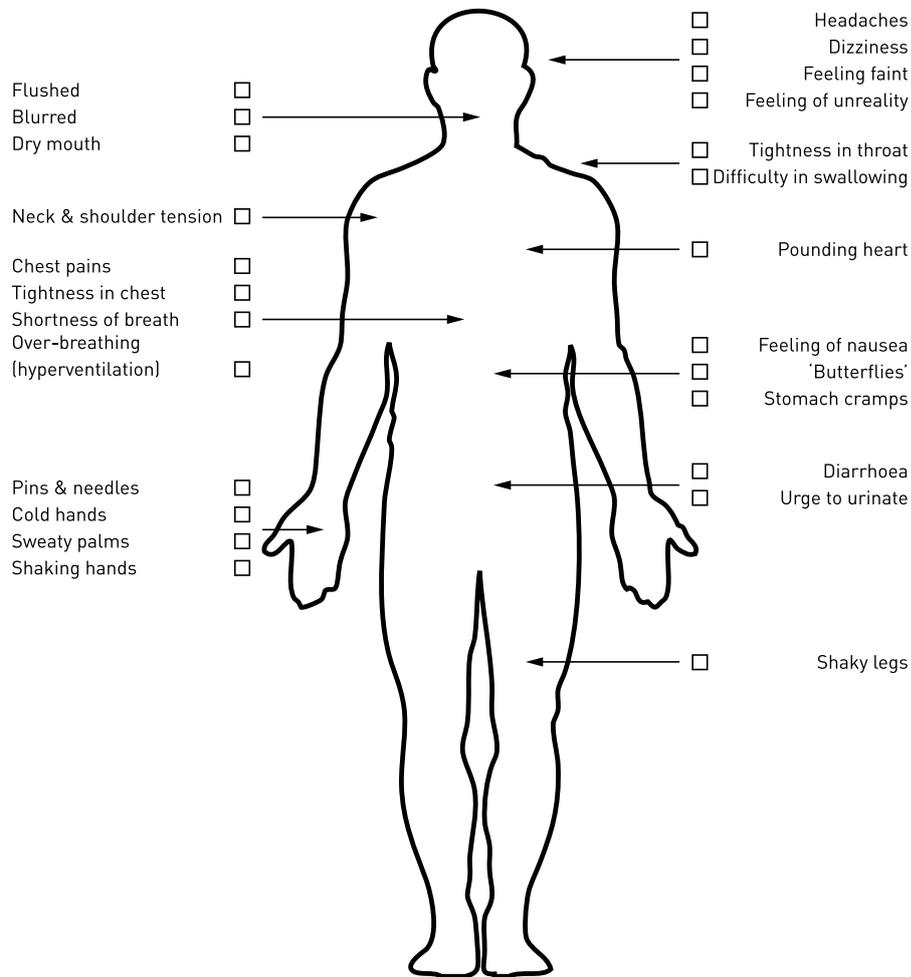
It is sometimes difficult to know if symptoms are due to anxiety or some other physical problem. One thing to look out for is whether the symptoms are worse when you are anxious and not so bad when you are more relaxed. If this is the case, it suggests these symptoms are related to anxiety. Keeping a

daily diary (ask your guide for a sample diary) may help you discover this for yourself.

As well as causing immediate physical symptoms of arousal, anxiety can lead to more long-term complaints such as sleeping difficulties or irritability.

### SYMPTOMS OF ANXIETY

This diagram shows some of the examples of the physical symptoms of anxiety.



Above are just some of the physical symptoms that we can experience when in a situation that provokes anxiety. You should tick all that apply to you when you are in a situation you find anxious, and add any more of your own. It may also be helpful for you to highlight those that are particularly uncomfortable or distressing.

For some people, an increase in the symptoms above can also lead to the experience of a panic attack.

Related leaflets include:  
 > The Fight / Flight Response  
 > Anxiety – A 5 Areas Model  
 > Panic Attacks

> Relaxation  
 > Relaxed Breathing  
 > Overcoming Hyperventilation

