



Social Phobia

What is social phobia?

Social phobia is a type of anxiety disorder. You feel intensely afraid of being judged or embarrassed while doing something in front of others. The activities may be as ordinary as eating a meal or writing a check. As a result, you avoid situations in which you have to do these kinds of things.

This disorder is more than being shy or being afraid of public speaking, although these are often symptoms of the disorder. It does not go away by itself and can severely interfere with your day-to-day life.

From 3 to 13% of people in the U.S. have had this condition during their lives. It affects men and women about equally. Most people with social phobia are not even aware they have a treatable disorder.

How does it occur?

The cause of social phobia is unknown. Both genetic and environmental factors may play a part. Social phobia tends to run in families. It usually begins in adolescence, or even sooner.

New studies using special brain x-rays (MRI or PET) may pinpoint the area of the brain that is related to anxiety.

What are the symptoms?

If you have social phobia:

- You may be anxious when you are the focus of attention, even for a short time.
- You know that your anxiety is not logical or reasonable.
- You have a lot of anxiety or even a panic attack (intense fear, a sense of possible doom, and physical symptoms such as sweating and dizziness) when you think about performing in a social situation.
- You are afraid that other people will notice how nervous you are.
- You are afraid of unfamiliar places and avoid them.
- You are unable to work, perform in school, or engage in social activities because of the fear of doing something embarrassing.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider or therapist will ask about your symptoms and any drug or alcohol use. You may be asked to have some lab tests to rule out medical problems such as hormone imbalances and heart problems. There are no lab tests which directly diagnose social phobia.

How is it treated?

Behavior therapy, relaxation training, social skills training, and assertiveness training are all part of the treatment for social phobia. Support groups are very helpful.

Antianxiety medicines, including antidepressants, are effective in treating social phobia. Newer medicines are being developed to help the millions of people suffering from this condition. Some medicines are:

- antianxiety medications such as lorazepam (Ativan), diazepam (Valium), alprazolam (Xanax), clonazepam (Klonopin), and buspirone (BuSpar)
- selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) such as fluoxetine (Prozac), sertraline (Zoloft), fluvoxamine (Luvox), and paroxetine (Paxil)

How long will the effects last?

Without treatment, social phobia can last many years and sometimes an entire lifetime.

What can I do for myself?

- Discuss your concerns with your health care provider or therapist.
- Reduce or eliminate caffeine in your diet.
- Discuss any medicine you may be taking with your health care provider.
- Realize that you are not alone and that your fears can be overcome.
- Do not use alcohol or other drugs to overcome your anxiety.
- Go to an assertiveness training class in your local community.
- Listen to the "Overcoming Social Anxiety: Step by Step" audio tape series available at most libraries.

For further information, see:

You may also want to contact the National Mental Health Association (NMHA). NMHA's toll-free Information Center number is 1-800-969-NMHA. NMHA's web site address is <http://www.NMHA.org>.

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