

Anxiety and diabetes

Anxiety is often a healthy response to a perceived threat. For most people, these feelings go away after the thing causing stress has passed. For some people, the fear becomes so intense and long-lasting that it starts to impact on daily life, including work, school, relationships and how you manage your diabetes.

If you're feeling this way, you might have an anxiety disorder, but you're not alone. There are many things you can do to reduce your feelings of anxiety.

“There are definite issues that come up, especially around anxiety and low blood sugar. One of the symptoms is anxiety – that fight or flight response – so understanding whether you're experiencing anxiety for psychological reasons or for physical glucose reasons is quite a difficult thing.”

Andrew, 59, person with diabetes



What is anxiety?

Anxiety is when a person experiences an excessive amount of fear in anticipation of something bad happening. Usually, this is a healthy response to a real threat. For example, certain situations, such as public speaking or having a hypo, can trigger anxious feelings.

Anxiety becomes a serious problem when these feelings last for a long time (at least two weeks) and impact on your daily life in a negative way. This means it's developed into a mental health condition, known as an anxiety disorder.

Symptoms of anxiety include:

- feeling nervous or on edge
- being unable to stop worrying or control worrying thoughts
- worrying too much about things
- having trouble relaxing
- being so restless that it's hard to sit still
- becoming easily annoyed or irritable
- feeling afraid that something awful might happen.

Anxiety also has physical symptoms, including:

- muscle tension
- a racing heart
- tightness in the chest
- an upset stomach.

If you have had any of these symptoms for at least two weeks, talk to your general practitioner (GP). They can make an assessment, offer treatment or refer you to a mental health professional.

It's important that you get advice from a qualified healthcare professional.

What has anxiety got to do with diabetes?

Anxiety is one of the most common mental health issues. In people with diabetes, some have anxiety before they're diagnosed. For others, they may be anxious specific things like hypos or fear of developing complications. We don't fully understand the link between anxiety and diabetes and researchers are studying this link.

What is clear is that anxiety can affect the way people manage their diabetes and, in turn, their physical health. Some examples include:

- checking blood glucose levels continuously because of intense fears of hypos or developing complications
- avoiding injecting in public, or not injecting at all, because you worry about what others might think.

"A few years ago I was really anxious, but it wasn't just the diabetes. Diabetes was just one factor, but it was a focal point."

Louise, 27, person with diabetes

Do you feel this way because of anxiety or diabetes?

Some of the symptoms of anxiety are very similar to the symptoms of low blood sugar (hypoglycaemia or hypo), such as trembling, sweating or a fast heart rate. This can make it difficult to know whether you're anxious, having a hypo or both. If you're not sure, always check your blood sugar, as this will help you to become aware of the reliable symptoms of a hypo.

Even if anxiety is not related to your diabetes, it can have negative effects on your health, life and relationships.

What you can do

It's important that you get help from your GP or another qualified healthcare professional. They can help you to identify if you have an anxiety disorder and offer treatment or make a referral to a mental health professional if needed.

If you don't have an anxiety disorder, your healthcare professional can help you to understand what else might be causing the symptoms. They can give you the best advice.

Whether you're experiencing anxiety or not, it's important to look after your emotional wellbeing.

Some of the following things may work for you – others may not, and that's okay. They might give you ideas about what you could try.

Reach out

Anxiety can make you feel like you're alone and may stop you going out. The people who care about you will want to support you.

- Make a point of talking to at least one person every day.
- If you don't feel like you have anyone to talk to, call our helpline, talk with your GP, or join one of our support groups or our online forum. You don't need to go through this alone.

Move your body

Physical activity has powerful effects on the brain and can improve the way you think and feel about yourself. Try to be active every day.

- Yoga relaxes and calms both the body and the mind. There are many types of yoga and you don't have to be a yogi master to feel the benefits.
- Try to get out and enjoy nature while you move, as this helps to reduce stress. For example, start with one short walk every second day, then gradually increase the time you spend walking and how often you walk.

Get enough sleep

Being tired makes it difficult to feel calm and relaxed. Try to have a sleep routine by going to bed and waking at the same times each day. The following tips might help:

- Keep a sleep diary to help you understand some of your patterns.
- Reduce your caffeine intake – limit your coffee, tea, and soft drinks, and don't drink them after 4pm.
- Be active during the day but don't do strenuous physical activity right before bedtime.
- Avoid napping during the day.
- Remember, bed is for sleeping, so avoid watching TV, checking emails, or using your phone in bed.
- Make sure the room is quiet and dark.

Don't try to mask it

It's common for people with anxiety problems to misuse alcohol, prescription medications, or illegal drugs. People adopt these behaviours as a way of coping, but they are just a temporary fix and don't resolve the real problem. These ways of coping don't help in the long term, as people become dependent on them. This increases their anxiety and can cause other health or relationship problems.

Don't try to fight it

When we feel anxious, our initial reaction is often to tell ourselves to 'stop being ridiculous' or 'get over it'. Fighting against anxiety doesn't work, and may make it worse. You may have thoughts such as, 'What is happening to me?' or 'I'm having a heart attack ... or a hypo!' These thoughts increase your anxiety.

It's better to work with the symptoms of anxiety, rather than working against them. This doesn't mean you should resign yourself to it or like it. Acknowledge that it is there and that it's your body's way of telling you something is wrong. You could try:

- **Observing** what it is you're feeling (e.g. fear, fast heart rate).
- **Acknowledging** whatever it is that you're feeling by saying aloud or silently to yourself, 'I'm feeling ...'
- **Telling yourself**, 'This will pass'.

Breathe

Relaxation is a powerful way of reducing anxiety. Try a breathing relaxation exercise (see box below). Find a quiet room for this activity and sit in an upright and comfortable position. The more you practice, the better you will become at naturally calming yourself during times of high anxiety. Once you've tried it a few times, you may be surprised by how helpful it is for improving your wellbeing. If this kind of thing isn't for you, that's okay, just skip it.

Talk with a professional

These are just a few ideas about how to prevent or reduce anxiety. But they can't replace professional help. It's always a good idea to talk about your concerns with your GP or another qualified healthcare professional.

Breathing relaxation exercise

1. Focus on your breathing. Take a deep breath in through your nose. Hold. Exhale through your mouth, as if you are blowing out a candle. Blow out all of the air.
2. Focus on slowing down your breathing into a calm rhythm. Exhale fully, releasing all the air.
3. As you continue to breathe slowly and deeply, repeat the following calming messages to yourself silently:
 - I'm feeling anxious right now but I'm okay.
 - I'm safe, even though I feel frightened.
 - This feeling will pass and no harm will come to me.
4. If you are shaking or trembling, try to physically shake out the tension.
Imagine that you're shaking water off your hands to dry them. Now stop, and notice how much more relaxed your hands feel.
5. Now relax the muscles in your body. Let all the muscles go limp. Then tense the muscles in your body. Hold on really tight for a minute or so, without causing pain. Then release and let the muscles go limp again. Notice how relaxed your muscles feel.

Who can help?

Your diabetes healthcare professionals

Your diabetes healthcare professionals are there to help you with all aspects of your diabetes, including how you feel about it. If you feel comfortable, share your feelings with them – they will give you non-judgmental support and advice. You may want to talk with your:

- general practitioner (GP)
- diabetologist (consultant)
- diabetes specialist nurse
- practice nurse
- dietitian.

Bring this leaflet along to your consultation to help get the conversation started. You will probably feel relieved after sharing your feelings, and it will help your healthcare professional to understand how you are feeling.

Together, you can make plans to manage your anxiety.

Psychological specialists

You might also like to talk with a psychological specialist. These professionals are best placed to make a diagnosis and provide treatment for anxiety. Treatment may involve:

- one-to-one counselling, like cognitive behavioural therapy
- medication, like anti-anxiety drugs
- a combination of psychological therapy and medication.

Ask your diabetes healthcare professional if they can refer you to a psychological specialist in your area who is familiar with diabetes.

You can also find help from your local Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT) team. Ask your diabetes team to refer you, or contact them directly by searching online for 'IAPT' and your local area name.

More information and support

There are lots of different sources of information and support. Talk with your healthcare professional team about which ones might be right for you.

NHS self-help guide on anxiety

A leaflet from the NHS containing information and practical ways to manage anxiety

Website: www.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp

Mind

A mental health charity offering information about anxiety, with telephone and online support, including peer discussion forums.

Call: **03001233393**

Email: info@mind.org.uk

Website: www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/anxiety-disorders

How we help

Diabetes UK

We're fighting for a world where diabetes can do no harm. And as the UK's leading diabetes charity, it's our job to tackle the diabetes crisis. We provide information, advice and support to people with all types of diabetes so they can learn to live well with their condition.

And we bring people together so they can learn from each other and get to grips with diabetes. Visit our website www.diabetes.org.uk/your-feelings

Our helpline is managed by trained counsellors there to listen, give support and answer questions. Call **0345 123 2399**

You can meet other people with diabetes at one of our local support groups.

Visit www.diabetes.org.uk/support-groups

Or chat to others online in our support forum at www.diabetes.org.uk/forum

And if you're on social media, join our online community on Facebook or follow us at [@DiabetesUK](https://twitter.com/DiabetesUK) on Twitter.

www.diabetes.org.uk

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