Generalized Anxiety Disorder

“I always thought I was just a worrier. I’d feel keyed up and unable to relax. At times it would come and go, and at times it would be constant. It could go on for days. I’d worry about what I was going to fix for a dinner party, or what would be a great present for somebody. I just couldn’t let something go.”

“I’d have terrible sleeping problems. There were times I’d wake up wired in the middle of the night. I had trouble concentrating, even reading the newspaper or a novel. Sometimes I’d feel a little lightheaded. My heart would race or pound. And that would make me worry more. I was always imagining things were worse than they really were: when I got a stomach ache, I’d think it was an ulcer.”

Generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) is characterized by 6 months or more of chronic, exaggerated worry and tension that is unfounded or much more severe than the normal anxiety most people experience. People with this disorder usually expect the worst; they worry excessively about money, health, family, or work, even when there are no signs of trouble. They are unable to relax and often suffer from insomnia. Many people with GAD also have physical symptoms, such as fatigue, trembling, muscle tension, headaches, irritability or hot flashes. Fortunately, through research supported by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and by industry, effective treatments have been developed to help people with GAD.

How Common Is GAD?
- About 3.1% of the adult U.S. population ages 18 to 54 - has GAD during the course of a given year.
- GAD most often strikes people in childhood or adolescence, but can begin in adulthood, too. It affects women more often than men.

What Causes GAD?
Some research suggests that GAD may run in families, and it may also grow worse during stress. GAD usually begins at an earlier age and symptoms may manifest themselves more slowly than in most other anxiety disorders.

What Treatments Are Available for GAD?
Treatments for GAD include medications and cognitive-behavioral therapy.

Can People With GAD Also Have Other Illnesses?
Research shows that GAD often coexists with depression, substance abuse, or other anxiety disorders. Other conditions associated with stress, such as irritable bowel syndrome, often accompany GAD. Patients with physical symptoms such as insomnia or headaches should also tell their doctors about their feelings of worry and tension. This will help the patient’s health care provider to recognize that the person is suffering from GAD.