

Managing worries about allergies

Information for patients, parents and guardians

Many young people who have allergies also experience anxiety, which is a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease. This factsheet talks about the body's reaction to worry, which can be very similar to an allergic reaction. It includes some tips on things you can do to help.

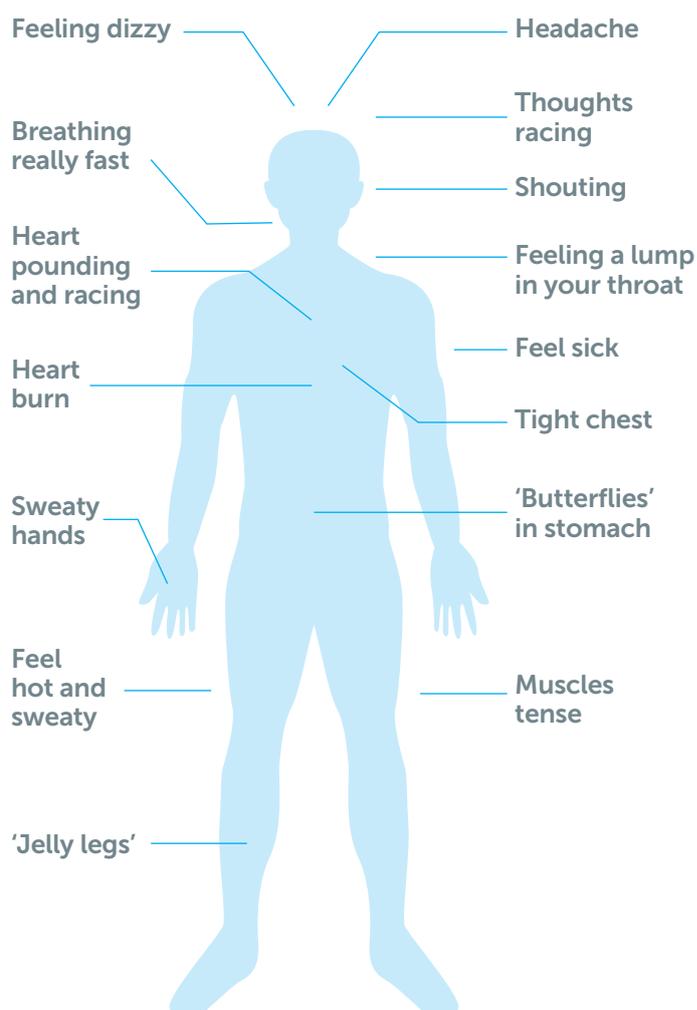
What is anxiety?

'Fight or flight'

Stress or anxiety occurs if our brain thinks we might be in danger. The body's natural reaction is to get ready to 'fight' or 'flight' (run away). This is also known as a stress response, and has been human nature since the days of cavemen and dinosaurs.

However, stress or anxiety can sometimes be triggered when there is no actual danger. For example, a person who is scared of spiders might act as if a spider is dangerous, even though the spider cannot hurt them. This is a false alarm!

Lots of things happen in our bodies during the 'fight or flight' response. These are caused by the central nervous system telling the body to get ready to fight or to run away from the danger.



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The link between allergies and anxiety

Many young people with allergies get worried sometimes. This is really normal. We are taught to avoid something that could harm us, so it is natural to be wary.

There are some common worries that many young people with allergies have. These include trying new foods, eating at parties or friends' houses, being near someone who is eating something they are allergic to and eating outside the home.

Also, worry can make us breathe faster and make our heart beat faster. This sometimes feels like we are having an allergic reaction. If this happens it is important to calm the body down by doing some square breathing and sitting quietly for a moment.

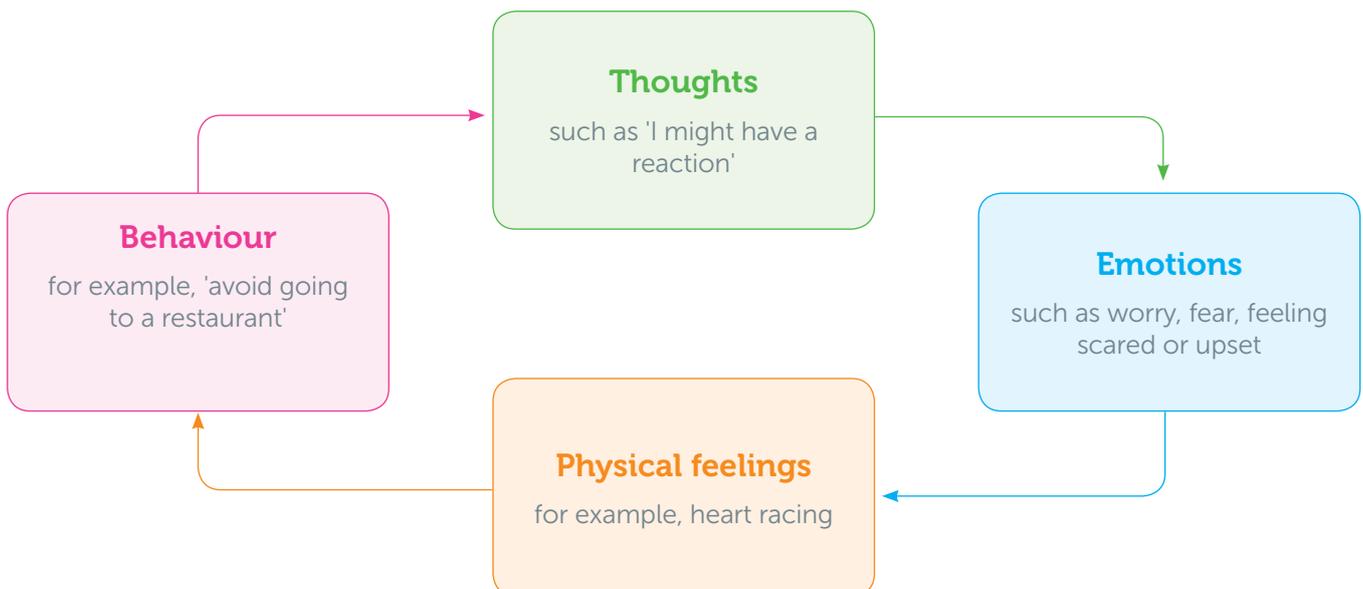
If it is worry then the feelings should go away. If you think you might have eaten or touched something you are allergic to, and your body still doesn't feel right, then you should follow the advice in your allergy action plan.

Body reaction to worry and allergies

The worry reaction in our bodies can be very similar to an allergic reaction. For example, worry makes our throats feel tight, like there is a ball stuck in it.

The anxiety cycle

There are four main parts to worry: thoughts, emotions, physical feelings and behaviour. They all affect each other, so changing any one part will change the others.



Ways to manage worry

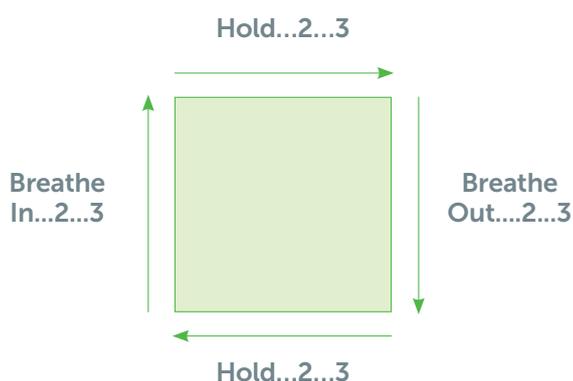
Relaxation techniques are a way of managing your feelings. They cancel out the 'fight or flight' response, so the body no longer acts as if it is in danger. They also reverse the physical feelings (for example, the heart beating faster), so the body can gradually stop the 'fight or flight' response. When relaxation techniques are practised and used regularly, they will change thoughts, feelings and behaviour, breaking the cycle of stress or anxiety.

Square breathing

Slowing down your breathing can be a really good way of helping the muscles in our bodies to relax. This can reduce the 'fight or flight' response to false alarms.

Step one: Sit or lie comfortably. You can close your eyes or keep them open – whatever feels better for you.

Step two: Repeat the square three times or until you feel relaxed. Some people find it helpful to imagine the tension flowing out of their body as they 'breathe out...2...3'.



The worry box

If you have lots of worries on your mind you could write them down on a piece of paper and put this in a box next to your bed. This will keep the worries safe overnight. You can then look at them the next day and talk them through with your friends or family.

Distraction

Distraction forces your brain to think about other things, so there is less space left for stress or worry. Distraction is a great way to stop your brain from focussing on negative thoughts and take your attention away from stress or danger.

- Count the number of red things you can see in the room
- Make a list of your five favourite films/songs/TV programmes
- Try and remember the words to your favourite song
- Imagine the line up of a football team
- Visualise your ideal house, imagine every little detail

Positive self talk

Sometimes it helps to remind yourself of your strengths and what helps you to cope with worry. You could write these on a piece of paper and keep it in your pocket, to look at when you are worried.

These are really personal things, so it might help to talk to a friend, member of your family or teacher to try and work out what your positive self talk could be.

Other people have used statements like:

- 'I stayed calm before, I can stay calm again'
- 'It's just the worry telling me that I'm in danger'
- 'I won't always feel like this, the feelings will pass...'

Recommended resources

Books

- The Huge Bag of Worries, by Virginia Ironside (2004)
- Helping your anxious child: A step by step guide for parents, by Ronald M. Rapee (2009)

Websites

www.anxietybc.com
www.youngminds.org.uk

Apps

Search on Google Play or the Apple app store:

- BASE, provided by Solent NHS Foundation Trust
- SAM, provided by the University of the West of England
- Smiling Mind
- Headspace (good for teenagers)

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