

At times, anxiety strikes so hard that it courses through the body, turning into physical pain that can make you feel like you're on the verge of a heart attack. When stress runs high, the body can often follow suit, and chest pain is one of the most alarming ways anxiety reveals itself. Anxiety-induced chest pain feels real because it is, though it frequently stems from emotional turmoil, once more a sign of how closely interlinked our minds and bodies are.

The body's response to anxiety

When the body perceives a stressor, it activates an autonomic nervous system mechanism known as the [fight-or-flight response](#). Your sympathetic nervous system has a built-in structure that allows you to react in times of danger, whether getting you ready to fight, hide, or flee. This intrinsic system has allowed for the survival and evolution of the human species and is indispensable in times of actual danger.

With [anxiety](#), however, we're governed by feelings of worry and fear. While uncomfortable, these emotions are not often present in the context of imminent physical danger. This is why when the effects of our stress response are exerted in anxious moments or panic, the sensations can be pretty **unsettling and often feel out of place**.

How anxiety causes chest pain

Several events occur during the fight-or-flight response, but those attributed to chest pain are brought about by releasing two critical stress hormones: **cortisol** and **adrenaline**. Let's take a glance at their impacts:

An **increased heart rate and blood pressure** can lead to feelings of racing or pounding in the heart and subsequent chest tightness or pressure. You may also experience **heart palpitations**, wherein you become aware of the racing rate of your heartbeat. [Research](#) has shown that this awareness can feed the cycle, precipitating further feelings of worry that exacerbate chest pain

Shallow breathing due to hyperventilation is common and has a [proven link](#) to chest pain. When breathing is rapid and shallow, you expel too much carbon dioxide from your blood. If those levels turn too low, you might feel symptoms of lightheadedness, tingling, or tightness in your chest.

Muscle tension brought about by significant stress and hyperventilation can tighten your chest muscles. This explains the discomfort or even sharp pain that is experienced during anxiety and, more often, panic attacks.

An important distinction: anxiety vs. panic

There is a subtle yet profound difference between an anxiety or panic attack that can easily be missed. While anxiety can be more constant and lingering, **panic attacks are more brief yet far more intense**.

An acute anxiety attack is a residual feeling of apprehension in activities you do in everyday life. Over time, these relentless anxiety attacks can morph into full-blown anxiety disorders such as **generalized anxiety disorder (GAD)**. It's worth noting that [research revealed](#) that this disorder can be a common diagnosis in patients with chest pain without a demonstrable coronary disease.

Then there is [panic](#). It strikes randomly, leaving you short of breath and clutched by a fear that feels as real as any physical threat. In general, symptoms of a [panic attack](#) include chest pain, difficulty breathing, lightheadedness, and an overriding sense of impending doom brought on by a moment of sudden, unannounced, intense fear.

If such attacks keep happening more often, they may be signifying a more serious **panic disorder**, where the anticipation of the next attack becomes an actual source of anxiety.

Whichever way these disorders are classified, stress and anxiety remain the hallmarks that precede their occurrence. Anxiety disorders affect approximately [40 million adults](#) in the U.S. alone, and almost 5% of them experience panic disorders at some point in their lives.

What does anxiety-induced chest pain feel like?

Anxiety chest pain has no universal description, as it is very differently felt from person to person. Nonetheless, some of the **most common characteristics** shared among those experiencing chest pain include:

- An intense, stabbing sudden chest pain that may catch you off guard.
- Others may feel a constriction in the chest, like there is a weight pressing upon it.
- The pain might also flare up on and off, depending on how anxious you are, or on whatever stressors you find yourself in.
- It is often exacerbated by deep inspiration, like hyperventilation or shallow breathing.
- A common symptom is a tingling sensation in the hands and fingers as a result of hyperventilation.
- Most people find that the pain subsides with rest, relaxation, or slow-focused breathing techniques.

In whatever form chest pain presents itself, the only unquestionable matter is the fright and fear that goes along with it, compelling many of those who experience it to seek emergency care. In fact, 47% of individuals with low-risk chest pain who often return to the emergency department had high levels of anxiety, according to a [2018 research](#).

How anxiety chest pain differs from heart-related chest pain

Anxiety chest pain often feels **sharp, sudden, and localized in one spot**, often at times when stress or panic has suddenly flared. It can come and go and vary in intensity, and it is often coupled with other symptoms of anxiety, such as shortness of breath, racing heart, or even a **feeling of impending doom**. It also tends to improve with rest or relaxation, especially after an immediate stressor has passed.

On the other hand, cardiac chest pain is much more constrictive, with crushing or squeezing pressure. This acute chest pain is commonly not confined but instead radiates from the chest to your arm, jaw, or back. Heart attack pain doesn't lessen with rest and may continue or worsen more characteristically during physical exertion rather than during emotional stress. Think of it as a heavy build-up that lingers and won't disappear easily.

When to seek medical help for chest pain

Chest pain, whatever its origin, should not be taken lightly. Although chest pain caused by anxiety might be common, it's very important to recognize heart condition symptoms that may require immediate medical attention.

If your chest pain **radiates to your arms, jaw, or back** or is accompanied by significant shortness of breath, dizziness, or even fainting, this could signal a more profound cardiac problem. Seek emergency medical care if any of these symptoms arise. Remember, it's better to be safe than sorry when your heart is involved.

The persistent or recurrent [chest pains](#) can be symptoms of coronary artery disease, angina or ischemic pain, pericarditis, or a coronary artery spasm, all of which often present with symptoms similar to anxiety disorders.

Physicians may utilize a series of **heart disease investigations** like an EKG, an [exercise stress test](#), or blood work to identify the correct diagnosis behind your pain, uncovering possible disease in coronary arteries or rendering it anxiety-induced.

Can chest pain from anxiety be dangerous?

While chest pain caused by anxiety may not be immediately life-threatening, it ripples throughout your life beyond the temporary discomfort it causes. Anxiety symptoms, especially if frequent with bouts of chest pain, can put your body under **constant stress**. This wears down the body over time, especially the heart, and [increases the likelihood of developing heart-related issues](#).

Frequent anxiety and chest pain can also take a psychological toll. Each attack further feeds into the fear, always waiting for the next surge of discomfort. It can push you deeper into states of hyperarousal, pressing you closer toward panic attacks that also worsen physical and emotional distress in a **self-reinforcing cycle**. If it goes on without restriction, then indeed, more profound mental disorders could develop.

How to relieve anxiety-related chest pain

Whether you're having a full-blown anxiety or panic attack or you're experiencing regular chest tightness due to chronic anxiety, the situation can be manageable. There are quite a few helpful relief and relaxation techniques that can offer great comfort and even prevent future episodes.

Immediate relief techniques

1. **5-4-3-2-1 technique.** This sensory-based experience helps you ground yourself in the present moment rather than surrender to worrying thoughts. Focus and register five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.
2. **Box breath.** Inhale for four seconds, hold your breath for another four seconds, exhale to the count of four, and hold again for another four seconds. Deep breathing in fixed cycles slows your heart rate and signals your nervous system to relax.
3. **Progressive muscle contraction.** Focus on contracting each major muscle group for a few seconds, then release and relax. Work up progressively from the toes and release the built-up tension.
4. **Cold splash.** Splashing cold water on your face or holding something cold against your skin activates the "dive reflex." When your body senses a temperature change, your heart slows and returns to its normal rhythm.
5. **Mindful visualization.** Close your eyes and visualize yourself in an environment where you are relaxed, safe, and protected, a place where you can feel safe. Truly engage with the visuals, sounds, and sensations around you to temporarily escape the reality you're afraid of.

Long-term strategies to manage anxiety and prevent chest pain

When treating chest pain caused by anxiety, it only makes sense to go to the source and manage the anxiety itself. [Cognitive-behavioral therapy](#) and other psychotherapies are powerful ways to rewire your mind.

Imagine your mind as a garden; if you have spent the last few years feeding it thoughts of fear, worry, and anxiety, that is what has taken root. In CBT, you learn to tend this garden differently, to pull out weeds and plant new seeds of resilience, calm, and clarity. Step by step, you **recondition the mind**, not to eliminate fear, but to see it for what it is — a temporary visitor, not your master.

At the same time, **lifestyle changes** act as a foundation for this inner work. [Exercise](#) energizes the body and quiets the mind, while [breathing exercises](#), mindfulness, and meditation help drop you into the present moment, where fear has no power. With enough sleep and a proper diet, you'll see just how connected the mind and body are and how the physical can support the mental to form a harmonious system that thrives rather than merely survives.

When to consider medication for anxiety

Sometimes, panic attacks strike frequently and impact your daily life, leaving you with physical symptoms or emotionally drained. Persistent worry refuses to ease despite your best efforts with therapy or self-help. At these times, **anti-anxiety medications can be the bridge that brings you back to balance**. [Anxiety medications](#) like selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) work to balance the brain's chemistry, allowing you to move from survival mode into a space where healing is possible. Multi-disciplinary approach to anxiety management

It's critical to consult a mental health professional before initiating any medical management. Together with your chosen physician, you can construct an anxiety treatment plan that is fitting for you.

Understanding the deep connection between anxiety and chest pain sets the course to reassure your mind and nurture health. Chest pain may be anxiety's way of asking you to listen, but never hesitate to seek medical help when it feels persistent or alarming. By managing your anxiety, you're not just easing symptoms; you're preventing future pain and reclaiming your peace of mind.

FAQ

Can anxiety cause chest pain even if I'm not necessarily anxious at that moment?

Yes, anxiety sometimes can indeed provoke chest pains even when you are not feeling anxious. This often results from subconscious chronic anxiety or stress, which manifests physically without a specific immediate emotional trigger.

How will I know the difference between anxiety chest pain and pain from the muscles?

Anxiety chest pain is more internal and often occurs with other symptoms such as shortness of breath or palpitations. Chest pain related to strained or injured muscles arises from certain types of injury or overuse and usually worsens with movement and when pressure is applied to the affected area.

Key takeaways

- Chest pain resulting from anxiety is sharp and sudden; heart-related chest pain is more likely to be a heavy, squeezing pressure radiating to other parts of the body.

- Anxiety-induced chest pain is quite real and often intense, but medical opinion should be sought to rule out heart-related causes.
- Anxiety chest pain is preventable in the future by managing anxiety through lifestyle changes, therapy, and possibly medication.

Resources

1. [Physiology, stress reaction.](#)
2. [Anxiety.](#)
3. [Heart-focused anxiety in patients with noncardiac chest pain: structure and validity.](#)
4. [Hyperventilation syndrome: a frequent cause of chest pain.](#)
5. [Chest pain in generalized anxiety disorder.](#)
6. [Panic attacks and panic disorder.](#)
7. [Anxiety disorders - facts & statistics.](#)
8. [Anxiety associated with increased risk for emergency department recidivism in patients with low-risk chest pain.](#)
9. [Awareness of heart attack symptoms and response among adults - United States, 2008, 2014, and 2017.](#)
10. [Chest pain evaluation: diagnostic testing.](#)
11. [Anxiety and depression in patients with chest pain referred for exercise testing.](#)
12. [Anxiety disorders and cardiovascular disease.](#)