Definition
General Anxiety Disorder (GAD) is one of the most prevalent psychiatric disorders seen in the primary care office and is characterized by excessive anxiety and worry about a number of events that cause clinically significant distress or impairment of function in daily life to the point of being unable to complete activities of daily living. The person finds it difficult to control the worry, even though there is little or nothing to provoke it.

Symptoms may fluctuate over time, worsening during times of stress. GAD is twice as likely to affect women as men. The disorder tends to develop gradually and can begin at any age with the highest risk at childhood and middle age. People with GAD may visit their doctor many times for a variety of complaints.

Risk Factors
- Being female
- Traumatic events, especially in childhood
- Chronic illness
- Stress
- Personality
- Genetics
- Substance abuse

Signs and Symptoms
- Worry excessively about everyday things
- Have trouble controlling their constant worry
- Know they worry much more than they should
- Not be able to relax
- Have a hard time concentrating
- Be easily startled
- Have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
- Feel tired all the time
- Have headaches, muscle aches, stomach aches, or unexplained pains
- Have a hard time swallowing
- Tremble or twitch
- Be irritable, feel light-headed or out of breath
- Have to go to the bathroom a lot

Diagnostic Criteria
The following criteria must be met for a diagnosis of Generalized Anxiety Disorder
1. Excessive anxiety and worry occurring more days than not for at least six months, about a number of events or activities
2. The person finds it difficult to control the worry
3. The anxiety, worry or physical symptoms cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational or other important areas of functioning
Short Clinical Guidelines:
General Anxiety Disorder (GAD)

4. The disturbance is not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance, general medical condition, and does not occur exclusively during a behavioral health event.

5. The anxiety and worry are associated with three or more of the following six symptoms (only one item is required in children) with at least some symptoms present for more days than not for at least the past six months:
   a. Restlessness or feeling keyed up or on edge
   b. Being easily fatigued
   c. Difficulty concentrating or mind going blank
   d. Irritability
   e. Muscle tension
   f. Sleep disturbance

Initial Assessment
1. Obtain/update patient history
2. Complete GAD-7 patient assessment (see attached)
3. Evaluate for medical conditions
   a. Endocrine diseases
   b. Neurologic diseases
   c. Chronic illness
   d. Medication use including over the counter medicines, herbal products, vitamins
4. Evaluate for substance use/abuse
   a. Nicotine
   b. Alcohol
   c. Caffeine
   d. Illegal drugs
5. Evaluate for psychiatric disorders
   a. Panic disorder
   b. Obsessive compulsive disorder
   c. Major depression
   d. Post-traumatic stress disorder
   e. Social phobia
   f. Separation anxiety disorder
   g. Anorexia nervosa

Treatment Options
Treatment choices depend on the problem and the patient’s preference. In general, anxiety disorders are treated with medication, psychotherapy, or both. A referral to a behavioral health specialist should be initiated if it is determined by individual patient assessment and discussion that psychotherapy is indicated or preferred. Psychotherapy can be used alone or in conjunction with medication therapy. In order to prevent adverse events, it is important for the behavioral health specialist and the primary care provider to coordinate medication administration.
The goal of medication therapy is to control the symptoms experienced with general anxiety disorder. Patient education at the start of therapy should include discussion of:

1. Effects and potential side effects
2. Use with other prescription and over-the-counter medications
3. Medication(s) must be taken regularly as effects may take up to 6 weeks before the full benefit may be felt
4. Dosage may need to be adjusted to achieve optimal results
5. Don’t stop medication(s) unless instructed by the doctor

Common medications used include:

- **SSRIs**
  - Fluoxetine (Prozac®)
  - Sertraline (Zoloft®)
  - Escitalopram (Lexapro®)
  - Paroxetine (Paxil®)
  - Citalopram (Celexa®)
  - Venlafaxine (Effexor®)

- **Tricyclics**
  - Imipramine (Tofranil®)
  - Clomipramine (Anafranil®)

- **Anti-Anxiety**
  - Clonazepam (Klonopin®)
  - Lorazepam (Ativan®)
  - Alprazolam (Xanax®)
  - Buspirone (Buspar®)

- **Beta-Blockers**
  - Propranolol (Inderal®)

Additional recommendations that may make treatment more effective include:

- Encourage family support
- Join a support group
- Stress management techniques
- Meditation
- Regular exercise
- Decrease caffeine consumption
- Decrease/stop smoking
### GAD-7 SCREENING QUESTIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>not at all</th>
<th>several days</th>
<th>more than half the days</th>
<th>nearly every day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not being able to stop or control worrying</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worrying too much about different things</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trouble relaxing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being so restless that it is hard to sit still</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Becoming easily annoyed or irritable</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Total Score:**

\[ \sum \text{Column} = \text{Add columns: } \sum \text{Column 1} + \sum \text{Column 2} + \sum \text{Column 3} \]

If you checked off any problems, how difficult have these problems made it for you to do your work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty Level</th>
<th>Not difficult at all</th>
<th>Somewhat difficult</th>
<th>Very difficult</th>
<th>Extremely difficult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>☐</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
<td>□</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SCORING AND INTERPRETATION OF SCORES:

GAD-7 Anxiety Severity:  This is calculated by assigning scores of 0, 1, 2, and 3, to the response categories of “not at all,” “several days,” “more than half the days,” and “nearly every day,” respectively.  GAD-7 total score for the seven items ranges from 0 to 21.

Scores of 5, 10, and 15 represent cut points for mild, moderate, and severe anxiety, respectively.  Though designed primarily as a screening and severity measure for generalized anxiety disorder, the GAD-7 also has moderately good operating characteristics for three other common anxiety disorders – panic disorder, social anxiety disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder.  When screening for individual or any anxiety disorder, a recommended cut point for further evaluation is a score of 10 or greater.

Using the threshold score of 10, the GAD-7 has a sensitivity of 89% and a specificity of 82% for generalized anxiety disorder.  It is moderately good at screening three other common anxiety disorders – panic disorder (sensitivity 74%, specificity 81%), social anxiety disorder (sensitivity 72%, specificity 80%), and post-traumatic stress disorder (sensitivity 66%, specificity 81%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interpreting Scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When screening for individual or any anxiety disorder, a recommended cut point for further evaluation is a score of 10 or greater.

Source: Robert L. Spitzer, MD; Kurt Kroenke, MD; Janet B. W. Williams, DSW; Bernd Löwe, MD, PhD  *A brief measure for assessing generalized anxiety disorder*.  *The GAD-7, Arch Intern Med.* 2006; 166:1092-1097