

the anxiety epidemic.

Prescriptions for anti-anxiety drugs come with nasty side effects, including addiction. Try these natural strategies from naturopath [Louise O'Connor](#) instead.

Mild to moderate anxiety is far more common but harder to identify than a severe anxiety disorder. Symptoms include fatigue, insomnia, digestive upset, sweating, racing heart, shortness of breath and irritability. Anxiety can be due to stress, health conditions, or withdrawal from alcohol, sedatives and illicit drugs. Natural therapists also recognise the role of food intolerances, heavy metal toxicity and chemical-induced nervous system stimulation.

Medications used to treat anxiety disorders include traditional drugs such as benzodiazepines, and newer options like antidepressants and beta-blockers. These are often prescribed along with psychotherapy.

Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) Currently the most popular anti-anxiety drugs as they are considered to have fewer adverse effects than MAOIs. SSRIs include Prozac, Luvox and Aropax.

Serotonin and noradrenaline re-uptake inhibitors (SNRIs) SNRI antidepressants influence levels of serotonin and norepinephrine in the brain. Effexor is an example.

Monoamine oxidase inhibitors (MAOIs) These drugs inhibit the breakdown of serotonin and norepinephrine in the brain. They are usually reserved for people whose depression does not improve with other drugs. MAOIs have limitations: a strict diet must be followed to avoid foods containing tyramine (e.g. aged cheeses, alcohol, cured meats and yeast spreads), which can interact with the medication.

Benzodiazepines These include Valium, Ducene, Serepax, Xanax, Kalma and the sleeping pill Restoril. Benzodiazepines work quickly by enhancing the action of gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), your built-in natural sedative.

Beta-blockers These alleviate heart palpitations and trembling by blocking adrenaline receptors in the heart and muscles. They are

recommended before a feared event, with the effects lasting a few hours.

There is a long list of adverse effects from anti-anxiety drugs, including fatigue, poor memory, depression, sexual dysfunction, drowsiness, nausea and impaired coordination. They are also habit-forming; benzodiazepines become addictive in only a few weeks. Stopping these drugs abruptly results in rebound anxiety and withdrawal effects. Individuals with a history of substance abuse should avoid benzodiazepines. Alcohol should be avoided, as it increases the effects.

Exposing the problem

Thousands of studies demonstrate that antidepressants work – but how accurately the research is reported is being questioned¹. According to experts led by Professor Kirsch at Hull University, antidepressants are only slightly more effective than placebos in treating depression. Their review covered all clinical trials, published and unpublished, for the four most common SSRIs submitted to the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for licensing approval² – Prozac (fluoxetine), Seraxat (Aropax or paroxetine), Effexor (venlafaxine) and Serzone (no longer prescribed in Australia).

A scientific analysis like this is only done using published data which can, in the case of antidepressants, lead to reporting bias. This often occurs when unsuccessful trials are withheld from publication. To circumvent this, the authors used the Freedom of Information Act (USA) to obtain data on all clinical trials submitted to the



The conventional approach

An underlying hormonal imbalance is often underestimated by standard medical treatment, even though women are twice as likely to be diagnosed with anxiety as men, indicating a gender influence. It is also well known that steroid hormones, e.g. oestrogen, progesterone, testosterone and DHEA, are neurologically active. In particular, progesterone has a potent anti-anxiety effect.



ILLUSTRATION BY JIM TSINGANOS

NATURAL SOLUTIONS

A natural approach works on the underlying causes of a disorder and, like any illness, anxiety is a signal that the body is out of balance.

- Take a daily **multivitamin/mineral** formula. Look for one high in B vitamins that assist the stress response. Folic acid and B vitamins also reduce homocysteine concentrations, which may be raised in anxiety disorders⁶. Combine with magnesium to relieve muscle tension and headaches.
- If you are low in serotonin, you will crave sugar and simple carbohydrates. Try a **chromium** supplement to curb sugar cravings.
- **Vitamins B6, B12, folic acid and trimethylglycine** naturally lower homocysteine. Levels above 15 increase your risk of depression, especially if you are a woman⁷.
- GABA increases the production of alpha brain waves associated with a relaxed, yet alert state. Conversely, GABA decreases beta brain waves

associated with nervousness and hyperactivity. **PharmaGABA™** is a newer form, naturally manufactured from *Lactobacillus hilgardii*⁸. This bacteria is used to ferment vegetables in the preparation of traditional Korean kimchi. Dr Michael Murray, a leading authority on natural medicine, advocates the use of PharmaGABA™ as a safe alternative for anxiety.

- The calming effect of **green tea** is explained by the action of L-theanine. This amino acid acts in an opposite way to caffeine, to provide a feeling of calm. In supplemental form it boosts brain alpha waves to create a state of deep relaxation and mental alertness. A similar effect is achieved through meditation. L-theanine also boosts GABA production naturally⁹.

FDA. When the data was assessed, their investigation into SSRIs' efficacy revealed no clinically significant effects, apart from a benefit to a small group of severely depressed individuals.

So, how did antidepressant drugs gain their reputation as a 'magic bullet'? Answering this takes us to the point where the lines between clinical research and marketing strategies blur. According to Kirsch, there is little reason to prescribe antidepressants to any but the most depressed patients³. His investigation queries accepted medical wisdom and has created a storm of controversy⁴. As a society, and as individuals, it is time to consider our dependence on antidepressants and the real causes of our emotional problems.

Smarter strategies

Optimal nutrition is the foundation of natural treatment for anxiety. General guidelines include nourishing your body with plenty of whole grains, fruit and vegetables, organic if

possible, to reduce chemical exposure. Include healthy fats: the omega-3s from fish, game and plants were part of our diet for centuries before being squeezed out by synthetic fats and polyunsaturated fats from vegetable oils. Omega-3s are essential to higher brain function.


Amino acids from protein are the building blocks for the neurotransmitters, chemicals that control communication within the brain. Their complex interaction is what shifts your mood. Therefore, a diet high in lean protein is important to lessen anxiety. Good protein sources include fish, lean red meat, organic chicken, organic eggs and vegetarian protein sources, e.g. legumes. Don't skip meals. Low blood sugar can contribute to anxiety. When you grab a snack, avoid foods high in additives, preservatives and other chemicals.


Benzodiazepines can trigger a withdrawal syndrome much more severe than many other drugs, including street drugs.

attacks, or more severe problems like drug induced psychosis⁵. Food sensitivities or allergies alter your emotional balance. Your health practitioner can help identify possible intolerances and get your diet on track. Emerging evidence shows that toxins wreak havoc on brain function. Most toxins are long-acting and fat-soluble. Since the brain is 60 per cent fat, poisonous toxins accumulate in this important organ. A gentle detox can lighten your chemical load.

Patterns of behaviour and negative reactions are usually so ingrained that it takes professional help to change them. A dysfunctional childhood often forms a blueprint of what feels 'normal' in adulthood. Cognitive behavioural therapy can heal the emotional experience that may lie behind feelings of anxiety. Exercise helps beat anxiety; sunlight and fresh air are also powerful antidotes to stress.

For specific diet and lifestyle advice to free yourself from addictions, read Patrick Holford's *How To Quit Without Feeling S**T* (Piatkus Books). This groundbreaking book promises to help you become addiction free, without the unpleasant symptoms of withdrawal. **Caveat** This information is not a substitute for advice provided by your health practitioner. If you are experiencing depression or anxiety, seek medical advice promptly. Do not stop taking prescribed medication without your doctor's consent.

 **LOUISE O'CONNOR** is a leading naturopath who writes and educates on women's health and natural weight loss. For more information, visit www.natural-weightloss-programs.com

 **WHAT DO YOU THINK?** Share your opinions and experiences on this topic. Email editor@natureandhealth.com.au

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YOUR HERBAL MEDICINE CABINET

BLADDERWRACK (*Fucus vesiculosus*) is a natural source of iodine, the essential mineral for thyroid health. Anxiety is often a symptom of thyroid disease. If anxiety is accompanied by other thyroid dysfunction indicators, you should discuss these symptoms with your doctor or naturopath.

ST JOHN'S WORT (*Hypericum perforatum*) is effective if depression is an underlying feature. The major constituents in St John's wort are hypericin and flavonoids, which work together to reduce nervous tension. St John's wort combines well with black cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*) to calm anxiety in menopause.

KAVA (*Piper methysticum*), native to many Pacific islands, is a supreme remedy for anxiety. Kava contains high amounts of kavalactones, believed to relax the mind and body. Kava is a unique anti-anxiety alternative as it does not impair reaction time or alertness. It should not be combined with alcohol.

VALERIAN (*Valeriana officinalis*) is a traditional remedy for nervous conditions. It is indicated in insomnia, allowing an easier transition to sleep. Valerian is not addictive and does not cause next-day drowsiness.

CHASTE-TREE BERRY (*Vitex agnus-castus*) re-establishes the normal balance of oestrogen and progesterone during the menstrual cycle. This can allay anxiety that worsens pre-menstrually.

WITHANIA, or INDIAN GINSENG (*Withania somnifera*) has long been used by Ayurvedic practitioners as a rejuvenating tonic. It is an adaptogenic herb, meaning it improves the body's ability to adapt to or deal with stress.

ZIZYPHUS (*Zizyphus spinosa*) is an effective traditional Chinese medicine with calming properties, and is traditionally used for irritability, anxiety and nervous exhaustion.



St John's wort