When you keep checking symptoms

Health worry, online searching and the pull for reassurance



Worrying about your health is understandable, especially if you or someone close to you has been unwell. Sometimes the worry takes over: checking, searching and asking for reassurance bring brief relief, and then the doubt returns. This sheet offers a calmer way to respond. It cannot tell you whether a symptom is serious, and it does not replace medical care. [1]
This sheet includes words you can borrow, because talking with someone you trust, or with a professional, can make difficult things feel more manageable.

1 Notice the loop

A sensation or doubt arrives, a frightening explanation follows, and you check, search or ask someone. Relief rarely lasts. Anxiety itself can cause headaches or a racing heart, which can then feel like more evidence. Noticing the loop is a first step, not a fault. [1, 2]

What I noticed, and what I feared it meant

A few words are enough. You can skip writing and bring this sheet to an appointment.

2 Cut back gradually

For a week, note how often you check your body, search online, ask an AI chatbot or ask people whether you are ill. Then choose one habit and reduce it a little at a time. When the urge comes, do something absorbing, such as a walk or a call. [1, 2]

Instead of searching: Write the question down for your next appointment.

Instead of checking again: Notice the urge, wait a few minutes, and turn to something you can do with your hands.

Instead of asking again: Try saying how you feel, rather than asking whether you are ill.

3 Get back one thing worry has taken

Health worries can shrink life: you may avoid exercise, plans or anything to do with illness. Choose one small step back towards something you have been avoiding, within any medical advice you have been given. [1]

One thing I would like to get back to

Words for someone close to you

"My health worry is loud today. I don't need you to tell me I'm fine. Could we go for a walk, or talk about something else for a while?" Agreeing this ahead of time can help you both.

You do not need to complete this sheet before asking for help. Turn over for medical care, emergency signs and support.

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Getting the right care

Agree a plan, and know when not to wait

Health worry does not rule out illness

Get medical advice for new, changing or persistent symptoms; do not assume they are anxiety. If a symptom could be life-threatening, such as signs of a heart attack or stroke, call your local emergency number now. Worry about overreacting should not stop you. [5]

Agree a plan with a doctor

It can help to agree a plan with a GP (family doctor) or another clinician who knows your history: which symptoms to report, when to come back and what to do in between. If health worries are stopping you living normally, or self-help is not working, ask about help for the worry itself. [1]

Psychological help can work

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) for health anxiety has good research support, including for people who also have physical health conditions. Medicines may also be considered; choices or changes need to be discussed with a qualified prescriber. [1, 3]

Words you could bring to an appointment

"I've been worrying a lot about my health, and checking and searching are taking over my day. Could we agree which symptoms to bring back to you, and talk about help for the worry?"

When the worry feels too much

Someone to listen, day or night: in Ireland, Samaritans 116 123 or text HELLO to 50808; in the UK, Samaritans 116 123; in the US and Canada, call or text 988; in Australia, Lifeline 13 11 14; elsewhere, findahelpline.com lists free helplines by country. Listening services do not replace medical or emergency care.

Sources and further reading

Guidance and research on health anxiety. This is an original educational handout, not a tested treatment.

1. NHS: Health anxiety (www.nhs.uk)
2. McMullan et al. (2019): health anxiety, online searching and cyberchondria (pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)
3. Cooper et al. (2017): CBT for health anxiety, a meta-analysis (pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)
4. Related research by Dr Jonathan Haverkampf: health anxiety (jonathanhaverkampf.com)
5. NHS: When to call 999 (www.nhs.uk)

Sources checked 25 October 2026. The organisations cited have not endorsed this resource. Support lines checked 25 October 2026.

More free information and support routes

More about health anxiety and what helps

Scan for Find Help, or visit jonathanhaverkampf.com and choose Find Help.

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