

A simple recipe for beating panic attacks

By JANE CLARKE

Jane Clarke's books are read by millions and she acted as adviser to Jamie Oliver on his School Dinners programme. Here she answers your questions on panic attacks and the benefits of nuts:

My GP says I've been suffering from panic attacks. When one comes on, my heart races, I sweat and feel incredibly anxious. Although he has suggested medication, I wondered if there is anything diet-wise that can help. *Melody Thompson, by e-mail*

This subject is very close to my heart, because about five years ago I found myself in a similar position. I was shocked to discover how frightening panic attacks are, and how debilitating. They are also very common: as many as one in ten people experiences a panic attack at some point in their lives.

The symptoms you describe are typical and are caused by an adrenaline rush. After the attack, it's common to feel utterly shattered. It's important to stay in contact with your doctor, because sometimes it is necessary to have medication and/or psychological support, such as cognitive behavioural therapy.

I found that dietary changes made a big difference. First, avoid caffeine. My first panic attack occurred during a horrible experience when I was strip-searched by El Al at Tel Aviv airport, Israel.

I had drunk strong, black coffee with sugar - and caffeine, especially when you're dehydrated (as I was) is the worst thing for any anxiety state.

Some people seem to be absolutely fine drinking strong coffee and tea, but for others, drinking anything stronger than a weak tea when they're stressed is like pouring oil on fire. So try to give up caffeinated drinks (which can include cola and some sports drinks) and see whether this helps you feel less anxious.

Certain herbal teas are traditionally associated with relaxation. The most popular is chamomile, but lemon balm and lemon verbena also help.

Alcohol may or may not help. A glass of wine can help us to relax - but sometimes alcohol has a habit of exaggerating the mood you're in. So if you're already feeling anxious, it can make things so much worse.

It's worth keeping a diary of what you eat and drink for a couple of weeks, and recording how you feel as well, to see if alcohol (or caffeine, or indeed any food in particular) ties in with anxiety.

You should also look at how well balanced your diet is (a food diary can help you here). People who eat small, healthy, nutritious meals are, in my experience, less likely to suffer from anxiety than people who eat fast food and very little fresh produce - especially if they're overdoing the high GI (glycaemic index) foods.

These foods give you a sugar high, and, as with caffeine or alcohol, if you're under stress, can make you feel 'wired', in turn exacerbating your anxiety. So avoid the high GI foods listed below and incorporate more of the lower or medium GI sweet-tasting foods.

High GI foods:

Honey, sugar, chocolate, still and fizzy sweet drinks, bananas, watermelons, figs, dried dates and raisins, mashed potatoes, cooked carrots, squashes, parsnips and swedes, white and wholemeal bread, rye-based crispbreads, couscous, rice cakes and whole-grain cereals (including bran flakes), popcorn (including plain). Medium GI foods:

Grapes, oranges, fresh dates, mangoes and kiwi fruits, raw carrots, sweetcorn, peas, potatoes apart from mashed), white and wholegrain pasta, porridge, oatmeal, wholegrain rye bread including pumpnickel), brown white rice.

GI foods:

Apples, pears, peaches, grapefruits, plums, cherries, dried apricots, avocados, green, leafy vegetables and most other vegetables (but see above), lentils and beans, soya products.

I eat nuts for enjoyment and nutrition. However, I do not know what quantities I should be eating. What do you suggest? *John Curtin, Harpenden, Herts.*

Nuts make a nutritious snack, whether you choose to eat them whole or in a spread such as the classic peanut butter, hazelnut or cashew nut butter.

I love nut spreads on toast, and use them in cakes as a healthy alternative to normal butter. Nuts and nut butters are a great source of monounsaturated fat. Use these instead of saturated fats such as butter to help reduce your levels of bad cholesterol (LDL) and prevent your arteries from clogging up.

Nuts and nut butters don't contain any cholesterol. Because they contain protein, they are a good food for vegetarians and vegans. The amount of protein varies slightly; the peanut, for instance, is about 25 per cent protein.

Nuts are rich in vitamin E (good for heart health), zinc (good for the immune system and fertility), selenium (important for a healthy immune system) and some B vitamins (good for the heart).

The walnut is particularly rich in omega-3 fatty acids, so is useful for people who don't eat fish. Use walnuts in salads, or grind into a powder and mix with a little olive

oil and then stir into pasta with crumbled goat's cheese and spinach. Delicious! You could also use walnut oil.

Nuts are low GI, which means the energy they provide is pretty long-lasting. That's why popping a little nut butter on porridge or toast makes for a gold-star breakfast.

Interestingly, the peanut is not in fact a nut but a member of the legume family, along with peas, beans and lentils. Admittedly, it contains a lot more oil and fat, but, like beans, lentils etc, it is a good source of both soluble and non-soluble fibre, which reduces LDL and keeps your gut moving in the right direction.

The word 'butter' can make dieters freak, but there isn't actually any butter in peanut butter. That's why it makes such a good sandwich filling for people with high cholesterol.

And bear in mind that a tablespoonful of peanut butter contains only about 120 kcal - roughly the same as a large banana. Butter has the same amount of calories but contains more fat - and saturated fat at that.

Some nuts, such as Brazils, contain saturated fat, but this doesn't put me off them because the health benefits outweigh this.

Sometimes, nuts and nut oil can become rancid. The oil within the nut reacts with the air causing oxidation, which turns the oil into unhealthy, heart-damaging fats. You can easily tell when nuts have turned rancid, as they taste bitter; but as long as you eat them before their use-by date they should be perfectly healthy.

Finally, some people find eating more than a handful of nuts can aggravate IBS symptoms or cause indigestion.

And you're best giving salted nuts a wide berth generally, as they are unbelievably high in salt (which can cause high blood pressure) and, as manufacturers often add oil, can be very oily.

As for quantities: I eat a handful of mixed nuts every other day, but particular favourites are almonds, because they're rich in calcium (good for bones).

A small handful of nuts can contain anything from 160 to 200 kcal. If you're watching your weight, have a few nuts a day rather than a whole packet ? they're very moreish, and you could find 500 kcals have slipped down without you realising.

Jane will answer a selection of readers' questions in Good Health every Tuesday. Send your nutritional queries to Jane Clarke, Good Health, Daily Mail, 2 Derry Street, London W8 5TT, or e-mail jane.clarke@dailymail.co.uk Jane cannot enter into personal correspondence. Please include contact details (not for publication).

Her replies cannot apply to individual cases and should be taken in a general context. Contact your GP with any health problems.
