

Fact Sheet: Specific (Simple) Phobia

Description and incidence: Approximately 19.2 million American adults age 18 and older, or 8.7%, suffer from specific phobia. Specific phobia is characterized by excessive fear of an object or a situation, exposure to which causes an anxious response such as a panic attack. Adults with phobias recognize that their fear is excessive and unreasonable but they are unable to control it. The feared object or situation is usually avoided or anticipated with dread.

Diagnosis: Specific phobia is diagnosed when an individual's fear interferes with his daily routine, employment (e.g., missing out on a promotion because of a fear of flying), social life (inability to go to crowded places), or if having the phobia is significantly distressful. The level of fear the sufferer feels varies and can depend on the proximity of the feared object or chances of escape from the feared situation. If a fear is reasonable, it cannot be classed as a phobia.

Onset: Onset of specific phobia may occur in childhood and is often brought on by a traumatic event; being bitten by a dog, for example, may bring about a fear of dogs. Fear of certain types of animals is the most common phobia. Phobias that begin in childhood may disappear as the individual grows older. The disorder can be co-morbid with panic disorder and agoraphobia.