

NIHR Greater Manchester PSTRC

Plain English Publication Summary

Publication: [Management of anxiety disorders among children and adolescents in UK primary care: A cohort study](#)

Publication details (Vancouver format)

Cybulski L, Ashcroft DM, Carr MJ, Garg S, Chew-Graham CA, Kapur N, Webb RT. Management of anxiety disorders among children and adolescents in UK primary care: A cohort study. *Journal of Affective Disorders* 2022; 313: 270-277. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0165032722007601>

What are the most important findings/conclusions in this paper? Why are they important?

The main findings are:

1. Most young people who have an anxiety disorder are not treated in the year following diagnosis. Patients registered at general practices in the most social deprived areas are least likely to receive treatment.
2. In recent years versus earlier years, fewer young patients diagnosed with an anxiety disorder have been referred to specialist mental healthcare services or treated with prescribed anxiolytic medication (medicines used to treat anxiety).
3. The prescribing of antidepressants has increased in recent years.

Importance: There are a lack of treatment guidelines for anxiety disorders in children and adolescents, so these findings could help to inform future national treatment guidelines in this area.

What did you do?

The Clinical Practice Research Datalink (CPRD) is a large dataset of linked GP and hospital electronic health records in England. Using CPRD, we identified 52,358 patients aged between 10 and 18 years who had been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder for the first time. We used statistical techniques to estimate:

1. How often antidepressant and anxiolytic medication was prescribed
2. How often referrals to specialist mental healthcare services were made by GPs or general practice nurses in the year following diagnosis.

We also looked at how often these prescriptions and referrals took place between 2003 and 2019 to see if there were patterns or trends.

Why did you conduct this research?

Anxiety disorders are a group of conditions that are quite common among children and adolescents. They generally do not require help from specialist mental healthcare services, and so are mostly treated in primary care. However, in the UK and other countries, there is a lack of guidance about the best ways to manage anxiety disorders. So, we examined what treatment children and adolescents with anxiety disorders receive in primary care during the year following their first diagnosis with an anxiety disorder. This information can be used to help develop new evidence-based clinical guidelines.

What was known before your paper was published?

In England, NICE guidance for treating affected children and adolescents only covers social anxiety disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). No national guidelines exist for generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), panic disorder, or specific phobias, which together form the majority (61%) of all diagnosed anxiety disorders in the UK. Before this study, there was a lack of evidence showing how children and adolescents with these conditions are treated in primary care, whether treatment patterns vary according to level of social deprivation, and also whether treatment has varied over recent years.

What is next? What is the potential impact of the work in this paper? What will change as a result of this paper (or the study it describes)?

Youngsters experiencing anxiety disorders are less likely to be prescribed medication or referred to specialist mental health services if they are registered at a general practice in a more socially deprived area. This is an important health inequality that public health professionals must address. More evidence from large clinical trials is needed to find out what medication types, as well as the prescribed doses and durations, that are most helpful in treating anxiety disorders in children and adolescents.

Does this paper link in to a particular study / project? If so, please summarise the study and explain how this paper has improved understanding, or will move the study forward.

This study was led by Lukasz Cybulski, whose PhD studentship was funded by the NIHR GM PSTRC. His three studies have increased our knowledge and understanding of:

- patient safety challenges in relation to mental illnesses (such as depression and anxiety disorders)
- neurodevelopmental disorders (such as autism)
- non-fatal self-harm and death by suicide among children and adolescents.