

# What Is Somatic Symptom Disorder?

Somatic symptom disorder involves a person having a significant focus on physical symptoms, such as pain, weakness or shortness of breath, that results in major distress and/or problems functioning. The individual has excessive thoughts, feelings and behaviors relating to the physical symptoms. The physical symptoms may or may not be associated with a diagnosed medical condition, but the person is experiencing symptoms and believes they are sick (that is, not faking the illness).

A person is not diagnosed with somatic symptom disorder solely because a medical cause can't be identified for a physical symptom. The emphasis is on the extent to which the thoughts, feelings and behaviors related to the illness are excessive or out of proportion.

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## Somatic symptom disorder diagnosis <sup>1</sup>

- One or more somatic symptoms that are distressing or cause disruption in daily life
- Excessive thoughts, feelings or behaviors related to the somatic symptoms or health concerns as shown by at least one of the following:
  - Disproportionate and ongoing thoughts about the seriousness of symptoms
  - Ongoing high level of anxiety about health or symptoms
  - Excessive time and energy spent on the symptoms or health concerns

- At least one symptom is constantly present (typically more than six months), although there may be different symptoms and symptoms may come and go

People with somatic symptom disorder typically go to a primary care provider rather than psychiatrist or other mental health professional. They often refuse to believe their symptoms are the result of mental or emotional causes rather than physical causes. Somatic symptom disorder usually begins by age 30.

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## References

1. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5)*. American Psychiatric Association. (2013).

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## Expert Q & A: Somatic Symptom Disorder

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## Patient Stories: Somatic Symptom Disorder

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