



# Understanding Anxiety

**Racing thoughts. Rapid breathing. Pounding heart. These are some of the things people experience when facing a threat.**

This is called the “fight or flight” response. It is our body’s superpower when we’re in danger. Those racing thoughts ensure our brain focuses on getting out of danger. The fast breathing increases oxygen in our blood stream. A pounding heart pumps more blood to big muscles in our legs and shoulders.

**All these changes ensure the body has extra energy and focus to respond to danger.**



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Fight or flight is an evolutionally survival mechanism. Back in the time of cave people, threats tended to be physical, like a tiger coming into our cave. In those situations, a physical response was vital for survival. That energy surge allowed cave people to run from the tiger or fight it off. Once the threat had gone, the body could rest, relax, sleep and return to a state of calm.

These days, we are unlikely to face the physical threat of a tiger coming into our home. However, when it comes to threats, our brains often take a 'one size fits all' approach. This means it can kick off the fight or flight response to threats even when they don't put us in physical danger. Say the issue is worrying about how to pay the bills. The brain might detect this as a threat and turn on the fight or flight response. Whirling thoughts, a pounding heart and fast breathing generally isn't going to help in that situation. It can also feel pretty yuck. And if the threat doesn't quickly go away, it can be hard to switch off.

Receiving a diagnosis of advanced breast cancer would certainly activate the fight or flight response for many people. This is a normal reaction to bad news. In time, as people make sense of the diagnosis and work out plans, the fight or flight response tends to reduce.

However, for some people, the brain continues activating the fight or flight response. Maybe this was already happening before the diagnosis, or maybe it's a new symptom. Some people with advanced breast cancer describe going into 'fight or flight' at every medical appointment or when the phone rings, or when thoughts of their diagnosis or worries about the future come into their mind.

**This continual activation of fight or flight is often called anxiety.**

One in four New Zealanders will experience anxiety in their lifetime<sup>1</sup>. Anxiety disorders are often diagnosed when people experience several months of excessive worry that is hard to control, along with physical and psychological symptoms of anxiety<sup>2</sup>. Anxiety can also be accompanied by panic or panic attacks. When people experience anxiety and/or panic it can be hard to think clearly and make plans or decisions. The fear and worry can stop people doing everyday things and makes it harder for them to enjoy life.

The good news is there's a lot that can be done to help. Understanding what is happening both physically and psychologically is often the first step.

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**Remember that rapid breathing when fight or flight is activated?**

**We can dampen that down by taking long slow deep breaths.**

- ✓ Try counting your breaths for one minute – by intentionally slowing your breathing (aim for less than 10 breaths per minute) you'll move your body into a relaxation zone.

**We can use words to calm our racing thoughts.**

- ✓ Repeating phrases like "I'm safe" or "I am relaxed" can help change our focus and turn down the fight or flight response.
- ✓ Try writing a helpful phrase down like "I can cope with this" and read it if you're feeling anxious.

**Doing something physical can help to dissipate that fight or flight energy surge. Depending on your physical strength and energy you could:**

- ✓ Go outside for a walk or do some gentle stretches.
- ✓ If you're in bed, try tensing and releasing your muscles.

**It can feel isolating when grappling with anxiety, but you are not alone.**

- ✓ Talk to the people close to you and let them know how you are feeling.
- ✓ Your doctor or medical team want to know if anxiety is impacting on you. Medication and professional support can make a big difference so please ask for help.





**For more helpful information and tips check out:**

- ✓ New Zealand Government's National Depression Initiative: <https://depression.org.nz>
- ✓ Mental Health Foundation – information and support [www.mentalhealth.org.nz](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz)
- ✓ Breast Cancer Foundation website – offers information, support, counselling, rehab [www.breastcancerfoundation.org.nz](http://www.breastcancerfoundation.org.nz)



## References

1. Te Rau Hinengaro: The New Zealand Mental Health Survey. Wellington: Ministry of Health. 2006
2. American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. 5th ed. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association; 2013.

## **IBRANCE® (palbociclib 75 mg, 100 mg and 125 mg) Capsules and Tablets.**

IBRANCE (palbociclib) is a funded prescription medicine used to treat HR+, HER2- advanced breast cancer taken in combination with an aromatase inhibitor or fulvestrant. IBRANCE has risks and benefits. Do not take IBRANCE if you are allergic to palbociclib or any of the other ingredients in IBRANCE capsules or IBRANCE tablets. Caution is needed if you are premenopausal or perimenopausal, have or have had abnormal blood test results, respiratory infections or problems with your lungs, problems with your liver or kidneys, are lactose intolerant, are pregnant or planning to become pregnant or are breastfeeding. Tell your doctor if you are taking any other medicines. Common side effects include infection, abnormal blood test results, tiredness, feeling sick or vomiting, diarrhoea, sore mouth, lips or tongue, hair loss, loss of appetite, nose bleed, skin rash, change in sense of taste, blurred vision, increased tearing or dry eyes, shortness of breath, bleeding or bruising more easily than usual. If symptoms continue or you have side effects, see your doctor, pharmacist or healthcare professional. Ask your doctor if IBRANCE is right for you. Use strictly as directed. Contains 75 mg, 100 mg or 125 mg of palbociclib. IBRANCE is funded. A pharmacy charge and normal doctor's fees apply for all prescriptions. Further information on IBRANCE is available from Medsafe [www.medsafe.govt.nz](http://www.medsafe.govt.nz) or Pfizer New Zealand Limited, Auckland, [www.pfizer.co.nz](http://www.pfizer.co.nz) Ph. 0800 736 363. V10721