Why do some people jump at the sight of spiders? And others get white as a ghost on an airplane? Learn the facts about these fears and others.

Seventy-five percent of Americans fear public speaking.

What gives you the creeps? Does the sight of a mouse cause you to break into a sweat? Does the thought of the dentist’s office send shivers up your spine?

Fears come in many varieties. At times, everyone feels afraid. In fact, about 6.3 million people in the United States have specific fears called phobias (FOE-bee-ahz). Scientists are still trying to figure out what causes phobias. One thing they do know: All fears cause a series of reactions inside your body.

Let’s take a closer look at what’s happening inside your body as your hair stands on end.

**Fight or Flight**

Believe it or not, fear can be good for you. Fear is your body’s way of protecting you from dangerous situations. “Mother Nature gave us all an alarm system. And that alarm system is fear,” says Michael Telch, the director of the Laboratory for the Study of Anxiety Disorders at the University of Texas.

How could fear be healthy? When you spot a growling dog, your body gets prepared for a fast escape. First, a small area in your brain called the amygdala (uh-MIG-duh-luh) sends out an “emergency siren” to your body.

Right away, your heart begins to beat faster. A racing heart sends more blood to your muscles. That way, you can run from that angry dog more easily. You will even start breathing heavily so your body takes in more oxygen—giving your muscles an extra boost.

Plus, you break out in a sweat. This sweat helps cool off your body, so you won’t get overheated. Your sweat is full of certain “fear” chemicals. And dogs can smell these chemicals. So dogs really can smell fear!

**Forget It**

Sometimes you get frightened in situations that are not dangerous. For instance, some teens are deathly afraid of speaking in public. If this fear of public speaking keeps you from going out with friends, it is a type of phobia. “When you have fear of something that’s no threat and it interferes with your life, then it’s called a phobia,” says Telch.

What causes a person to have a phobia? Some scientists think that childhood experiences could

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**WORD WORKOUT**

va·ri·e·ties: types, kinds spe·ci·fic: special, certain se·ries: chain, group of events in order anx·i·ty dis·or·ders: feelings of fear without good reason in·ter·feres: gets in the way, holds up
be partly to blame for some phobias. A memory of a scary childhood event would get stored in your amygdala, in your brain. That grape-size area in the brain is considered the fear center. When you recall a past memory, your body prepares to flee.

“At times, that alarm system can go off when you’re not in any danger or harm,” says Telch.

Fear Not

Scientists and doctors are coming up with effective ways to help you overcome your phobias. If a person is very fearful of heights, the doctor will gradually have that person climb to a higher floor of a building.

“The person might be encouraged to go to the second floor and look over the railing,” explains Telch.

Over time, the person would realize that it’s not so scary to be up high.

Getting over your fears is a slow and complicated process. So if you shriek at the sight of worms, a doctor would never place you in a tank full of these slithering creatures. Don’t worry.

That can be left to bold Fear Factor contestants!

—Jeanna Bryner

Here are two common phobias. Can you figure out their definitions? Answers are in the Teacher’s Edition.

Zoophobia

Claustrophobia

Cause and Effect

“Cause and effect” describes the relationship between two things, when one thing makes something else happen. The cause is why something happens. The effect is what happens, or the result. Read the cause and effect examples below based on the article you just read. Then try to fill in the blank spaces.

Cause #1: You spot a growling dog or a slimy snake.

Effect #1:

Cause #2:

Effect #2: Your heart sends more blood to your muscles.

Cause #3:

Effect #3: Your amygdala sends out an emergency siren to your body.

WORD WORKOUT

flee: run away  ef-fec-tive: useful, successful  grad-u-al-ly: slowly, bit by bit