

Panic Disorder and Panic Attacks



Information for patients and families

Read this information to learn:

- What panic disorder is
- What causes panic attacks
- The signs and symptoms of a panic attack
- How panic disorders are treated



What is panic disorder?

Panic disorder is a type of anxiety disorder. People with panic disorder have panic attacks. During these attacks, people have strong body signs. For example, they may feel like they are having a heart attack or have trouble breathing. They can also feel like they are losing control or their sense of what is real.

Panic attacks can happen at any time. An attack usually lasts for a few minutes. Some symptoms may last longer.

People who have panic disorder often worry about when the next panic attack will happen. They may avoid places where they think they will have a panic attack. Sometimes the worry is so strong they are afraid to leave their home.

Not all people who have panic attacks develop panic disorder. Often, people with panic disorder are also depressed or have drug and alcohol problems.

What causes panic attacks?

It is not clear why a panic attack happens. A family history of panic attacks, brain chemistry (how your brain works) and stressful life experiences can play a big part.

What are the signs and symptoms of a panic attack?

- Very fast or uneven heart rate
- Sweating
- Feeling short of breath
- Shaking or trembling
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Feeling like you are choking
- Feeling dizzy, unsteady or lightheaded
- Nausea or feeling sick to your stomach
- Feeling separated from yourself or what is real
- Feeling hot or cold

If you have any of these symptoms, see a doctor.

What are the treatments?

Panic disorders respond very well to treatment.

There are many types of treatments that can help, including:

- **Psychotherapy**

During psychotherapy, you talk to a psychiatrist or psychologist about your moods, feelings and behavior. They can provide education and support to help you cope with any troubling feelings.

- **Medicines**

Medicines for panic disorder can be used to control the symptoms of panic attacks and reduce how often they happen.

- **Relaxation skills**

Relaxation skills include things like deep breathing or progressive muscle relaxation.

- **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)**

CBT is an effective therapy for panic disorder. It can help you change how you think and what to do in certain situations. These changes can help you feel better.

Combining medicine and therapy can be very helpful. Some people can recover fully with treatment. Others need therapy for a longer time to feel better and prevent the return of any symptoms.



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