



Panic Disorder

What is panic disorder?

Panic disorder is a kind of anxiety disorder. When panic attacks occur without warning, or you have repeated unexpected panic attacks it is called panic disorder. These attacks can happen many times every day or every week. You might worry about having these attacks throughout the day. It can interfere with your work or personal life.

How does it occur?

Panic is a "fight or flight" reaction. It is like an adrenaline surge that goes wrong. How it happens is not known. Scientists know that certain parts of the brain and nervous system cause the emotional and physical surge of fear. While a panic attack is very scary, having one doesn't usually mean that you are getting panic disorder.

If you are going to develop panic disorder it usually begins when you are a teenager or a young adult. Occasionally it begins after age 30, but almost never in middle age or later. It tends to run in families. Studies with identical twins suggests a genetic link to the disorder. However, one half or more of people with panic disorder do not have a close relative with the same problem.

Many people with panic disorder also have agoraphobia. Also common with panic disorder is depression.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of panic disorder are the same as a panic attack except that the attacks come repeatedly and there is great worry that an attack will happen. If you have at least 4 of these symptoms, it means you have had a panic attack. If these symptoms go on for more than 30 days, it usually means that you have panic disorder.

The symptoms of a panic attack are:

- It comes on suddenly with full symptoms usually within 10 minutes.
- It is often unpredictable.
- You feel intense fear and may fear that something terrible is about to happen.
- You worry that you are losing control.
- You may worry about dying, going crazy, or that you are having a heart attack.
- You have many body symptoms such as shaking, sweating, being hot or cold, or feeling your heart pounding.

- You may have stomach pain or an upset stomach.
- You may feel like you're choking or can't breathe.
- You may be dizzy, faint, or lightheaded.

Because the common symptoms include chest pain and a shortness of breath, you may mistake a panic attack for a heart attack. If you have chest pain or a shortness of breath get medical treatment right away to find out the cause.

How is it diagnosed?

Your health care provider or a mental health professional can tell you if your symptoms are panic disorder. Your symptoms must last for at least a month to be diagnosed as panic disorder.

Your health care provider will ask about your symptoms and any drug or alcohol use. You may be asked to have lab tests to rule out medical problems such as hormone imbalances. It is important to make sure that medical problems are not causing the panic attacks. Some medications may cause or increase panic attacks. You may need to modify your medications to make sure they are not part of the problem. No lab tests can diagnose panic disorder.

How is it treated?

You should not try to overcome panic disorder solely by yourself. panic disorder can be successfully treated with psychotherapy and antidepressant medicine. Discuss these with your doctor or a mental health professional.

Medicine

Several medicines can help treat panic disorder. Your doctor will carefully select the best one for you. Some medicines are:

- anti-anxiety medications such as lorazepam (Ativan), diazepam (Valium), alprazolam (Xanax), clonazepam (Klonopin), and buspirone (BuSpar)
- selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) such as fluoxetine (Prozac), sertraline (Zoloft), fluvoxamine (Luvox), and paroxetine (Paxil)
- tricyclic antidepressants such as imipramine (Tofranil), desipramine (Norpramin), and clomipramine (Anafranil).

There are no nonprescription medicines available to treat panic disorder.

Psychotherapy

Seeing a psychologist, psychiatrist, or psychotherapist is helpful. Therapy may last a short time or for many months. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is one form of psychotherapy that is especially helpful with panic disorder. CBT is a way to help you identify and change thought processes that lead to panic attacks. Replacing negative thoughts with more positive ones can help you to control panic attacks and the anxiety that a panic attack will happen.

Natural and Alternative Treatments

- **Herbs and Supplements.** Many herbal and dietary products (kava root, lemon balm, lavender, passion flower, valerian) are said to help control anxiety problems. None of these herbs will treat or prevent panic attacks. No herb or dietary supplement has strong research support to prove that it helps panic disorder.
- **Biofeedback.** With biofeedback you learn to control body functions such as heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tension, or brain wave patterns. Biofeedback can help with tension, anxiety, and concentration. It is an effective addition to medical and/or psychotherapy.
- **Massage Therapy.** Massage therapy may help lower stress and muscle tension. This may help treat the broader anxiety symptoms of panic disorder.
- **Relaxation Therapies.** Learning special relaxation methods can help you control the general anxiety that goes along with panic disorder. Relaxation may also help you to shorten or make panic disorders less severe. Yoga and meditation may be helpful.
- **Hypnotherapy.** Hypnosis can be useful in learning to control anxiety symptoms and environmental events that trigger panic attacks.
- **Art and Music Therapies.** Some people find art and music therapy, along with medicines and psychotherapy, helps control the general anxiety about having a panic attack.

How long will the effects last?

Panic disorder may affect you for a short period of time or may continue for many years. It is unknown why it stops or continues.

What can I do to help myself or my loved one?

Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is important. To help control panic disorder:

- Exercise for at least 20 minutes every day, for example a brisk walk.
- Learn which activities make you feel better and do them often.
- Talk to your family and friends.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Keep a regular schedule for going to sleep and getting up.
- Avoid using alcohol or drugs.
- Learn relaxation techniques or yoga.

Many towns and cities have support groups for panic disorder sufferers. Look in the telephone book under Support Groups or ask your local community mental health center.

When should I seek help?

Do not try to overcome panic disorder all by yourself. Seek help from your health care provider or a mental health professional.

When should I seek immediate help?

Get emergency care if you or a loved one have serious thoughts of suicide or self harm. Also seek immediate help if you have severe chest pain or trouble breathing.

For more information, see

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