

Panic disorder



What is panic disorder?

Panic disorder is a mental health condition that consists of unexpected and frequent panic attacks that are not restricted to particular stimuli or situations. A panic attack is a wave of sudden and overwhelming fear that brings a sense of losing control, a feeling of unreality, extreme anxiety and fear of imminent death, in the absence of specific danger. In between panic attacks, sufferers often worry intensely about when the next attack will occur, and this results in significant impairment in personal, family, social, educational/occupational or other important areas of functioning. Panic attacks usually last for several minutes and often occur several times during the day, or weekly.

Women are twice as likely than men to be diagnosed with panic disorder. The disorder usually develops in the late teens or early adulthood.

Common signs and symptoms of panic disorder

Physical

- racing heart rate
- chest pains
- trouble breathing or hyperventilating
- a feeling of “pins and needles” in fingers or toes
- swallowing difficulties or a “choking” feeling
- trembling, sweating or flushing
- numbness
- lightheadedness or dizziness
- nausea or digestive problems

Psychological

- a feeling that you are about to die or will lose control of yourself
- trouble concentrating or thinking clearly
- being easily startled or consistently “on edge”
- feeling afraid that a panic attack will occur.

What causes panic disorder?

Panic disorder is not fully understood, but research points to a genetic component as it seems to run in families. Panic disorder can develop as the result of exposure to a prolonged or extremely stressful event, such as the loss of a loved one or a serious illness or injury.

When to seek help for panic disorder

If panic attacks are disrupting your daily life, if you've had one or more panic attacks during the week for no apparent reason or if you feel you're worrying about when the next attack will occur, it's important to talk to your doctor or to seek other professional help. Panic disorder can worsen over time with panic attacks becoming more frequent, so it's important to seek help as soon as possible. Agoraphobia and social anxiety can also develop as a result of untreated panic disorder.

Treating panic disorder

Psychosocial interventions

Talking to a mental health professional can be helpful. Interventions include the following:

- **Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)** is commonly used to treat panic disorder. CBT focuses on challenging or changing cognitive distortions (thoughts, beliefs and attitudes) that may trigger panic attacks and on developing coping strategies. As a result, panic attacks happen less frequently as you learn how to react calmly.
- **Exposure therapy (ET)** involves confronting fears that may be causing panic attacks in a controlled setting.

Medication

Certain medications can be helpful. Beta blockers are medications that can control the symptoms of a panic attack, such as rapid heart rate, sweating or trembling. Antidepressant and anti-anxiety medications can lessen the frequency of panic attacks.

How can you help yourself if you are experiencing panic disorder?

If you are experiencing panic disorder, there are several approaches you can take on your own to reduce the stress and anxiety that come with having frequent panic attacks. They include the following:

- **Healthy diet.** The stress and anxiety of having or anticipating a panic attack can take a toll on your physical health. Eating a balanced, healthy diet rich in whole grains, vegetables and fruits can help keep your body healthy.
- **Relaxation techniques.** Yoga, breathing techniques and visualization exercises work to calm the physical sensations of a panic attack while also helping to ease upsetting thoughts and feelings.
- **Meditation.** Starting a meditation practice can help reduce anxiety and stress. Mindfulness meditation is one technique that helps you become aware of your thoughts and feelings without judging them, allowing them to come and go.

How can you help a friend or family member who is experiencing panic disorder?

It is often embarrassing and uncomfortable to discuss panic disorder with a family member, friend or coworker. If someone you know is suffering from frequent panic attacks, letting them know you are available to support them can be extremely helpful. Actively listening to their fears and worry around their panic disorder is an important step in helping them to cope.

If you are around them when a panic attack occurs, stay calm and help them to focus on regulating their breathing. Things that can help include exercises such as tensing and then relaxing their muscles or finding a quiet spot to focus their thoughts.

Resources

Mental health and psychosocial support

Generalized anxiety disorder treatments

Personal stories of grief and anxiety

How to help someone with anxiety

Healthy diet

Yoga for stress relief

Mental health professionals by country

This is one of a series of factsheets produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean to give the general public more information about mental disorders and how they can be treated. You can download all the factsheets free of charge from the Regional Office's website at: <https://www.emro.who.int/mnh/publications/mental-health-disorders.html>.