

Panic Disorder

"It started 10 years ago, when I had just graduated from college and started a new job. I was sitting in a business seminar in a hotel and this thing came out of the blue. I felt like I was dying.

"For me, a panic attack is almost a violent experience. I feel disconnected from reality. I feel like I'm losing control in a very extreme way. My heart pounds really hard, I feel like I can't get my breath, and there's an overwhelming feeling that things are crashing in on me.

"In between attacks there is this dread and anxiety that it's going to happen again. I'm afraid to go back to places where I've had an attack. Unless I get help, there soon won't be anyplace where I can go and feel safe from panic."

People with panic disorder have feelings of terror that strike suddenly and repeatedly with no warning. They can't predict when an attack will occur, and many develop intense anxiety between episodes, worrying when and where the next one will strike.

If you are having a panic attack, most likely your heart will pound and you may feel sweaty, weak, faint, or dizzy. Your hands may tingle or feel numb, and you might feel flushed or chilled. You may have nausea, chest pain or smothering sensations, a sense of unreality, or fear of impending doom or loss of control. You may genuinely believe you're having a heart attack or losing your mind, or on the verge of death.

Panic attacks can occur at any time, even during sleep. An attack generally peaks within 10 minutes, but some symptoms may last much longer.

Panic disorder affects about 2.4 million adult Americans¹ and is twice as common in women as in men.² It most often begins during late adolescence or early adulthood.² Risk of developing panic disorder appears to be inherited.³ Not everyone who experiences panic attacks will develop panic disorder—for example, many people have one attack but never have another. For those who do have panic disorder, though, it's important to seek treatment. Untreated, the disorder can become very disabling.

Many people with panic disorder visit the hospital emergency room repeatedly or see a number of doctors before they obtain a correct diagnosis. Some people with panic disorder may go for years without learning that they have a real, treatable illness.

Panic disorder is often accompanied by other serious conditions such as depression, drug abuse, or alcoholism^{4,5} and may lead to a pattern of avoidance of places or situations where panic attacks have occurred. For example, if a panic attack strikes while you're riding in an elevator, you may develop a fear of elevators. If you start avoiding them, that could affect your choice of a job or apartment and greatly restrict other parts of your life.

Some people's lives become so restricted that they avoid normal, everyday activities such as grocery shopping or driving. In some cases they become housebound. Or, they may be able to confront a feared situation only if accompanied by a spouse or other trusted person.

Basically, these people avoid any situation in which they would feel helpless if a panic attack were to occur. When people's lives become so restricted, as happens in about one-third of people with panic disorder,² the condition is called *agoraphobia*. Early treatment of panic disorder can often prevent agoraphobia.

Panic disorder is one of the most treatable of the anxiety disorders, responding in most cases to medications or carefully targeted psychotherapy.

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Facts about Panic Disorder

Panic disorder is characterized by unexpected and repeated episodes of intense fear accompanied by physical symptoms that may include chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness or abdominal distress. These sensations often mimic symptoms of a heart attack or other life-threatening medical conditions. As a result, the diagnosis of panic disorder is frequently not made until extensive and costly medical procedures fail to provide a correct diagnosis or relief.

Many people with panic disorder develop intense anxiety between episodes. It is not unusual for a person with panic disorder to develop phobias about places or situations where panic attacks have occurred, such as in supermarkets or other everyday situations. As the frequency of panic attacks increases, the person often begins to avoid situations where they fear another attack may occur or where help would not be immediately available. This avoidance may eventually develop into agoraphobia, an inability to go beyond known and safe surroundings because of intense fear and anxiety.

Fortunately, through research supported by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and by industry, effective treatments have been developed to help people with panic disorder.

How Common Is Panic Disorder?

- About 1.7 percent of the adult U.S. population ages 18 to 54—approximately 2.4 million Americans—has panic disorder in a given year.
- Women are twice as likely as men to develop panic disorder.
- Panic disorder typically strikes in young adulthood. Roughly half of all people who have panic disorder develop the condition before age 24.

What Causes Panic Disorder?

Heredity, other biological factors, stressful life events, and thinking in a way that exaggerates relatively normal bodily reactions are all believed to play a role in the onset of panic disorder. The exact cause or causes of panic disorder are unknown and are the subject of intense scientific investigation.

Studies in animals and humans have focused on pinpointing the specific brain areas and circuits involved in anxiety and fear, which underlie anxiety disorders such as panic disorder. Fear, an emotion that evolved to deal with danger, causes an automatic, rapid protective response that occurs without the need for conscious thought. It has been found that the body's fear response is coordinated by a small structure deep inside the brain, called the amygdala.

The amygdala, although relatively small, is a very complicated structure, and recent research suggests that anxiety disorders may be associated with abnormal activation in the amygdala. One aim of research is to use such basic scientific knowledge to develop new therapies.

What Treatments Are Available for Panic Disorder?

Treatment for panic disorder includes medications and a type of psychotherapy known as cognitive-behavioral therapy, which teaches people how to view panic attacks differently and demonstrates ways to reduce anxiety. NIMH is conducting a large-scale study to evaluate the effectiveness of combining these treatments. Appropriate treatment by an experienced professional can reduce or prevent panic attacks in 70 percent to 90 percent of people with panic disorder. Most patients show significant progress after a few weeks of therapy. Relapses may occur, but they can often be effectively treated just like the initial episode.

Can People With Panic Disorder Also Have Other Illnesses?

Research shows that panic disorder can coexist with other disorders, most often depression and substance abuse. About 30 percent of people with panic disorder abuse alcohol and 17 percent abuse drugs, such as cocaine and marijuana, in unsuccessful attempts to alleviate the anguish and distress caused by their condition. Appropriate diagnosis and treatment of other disorders such as substance abuse or depression are important to successfully treat panic disorder.

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References

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