



PANIC DISORDER

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. In between times there is a persistent, lingering worry that another attack could come any minute.

TERROR STRIKES

When a panic attack strikes, most likely your heart pounds 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 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 stroke, losing your mind, or on the verge of death. Attacks can occur any time, even during nondream sleep. While most attacks average a couple of minutes, occasionally they can go on for up to 10 minutes.

Panic Attack Symptoms:

- Pounding heart
- Chest pains
- Light-headedness or dizziness
- Nausea or stomach problems
- Flushes or chills
- Shortness of breath or a feeling of smothering or choking
- Tingling or numbness
- Shaking or trembling
- Feelings of unreality
- Terror
- A feeling of being out of control or going crazy
- Fear of dying
- Sweating

WHO IS AFFECTED?

Panic disorder strikes at least 1.6 percent of the population and is twice as common in women as in men. It can appear at any age—in children or in the elderly—but most often it begins in young adults. Not everyone who experiences panic attacks will develop panic disorder—for example, many people have one attack but never have another. For those who have panic disorder, it's important to seek treatment. Untreated, the disorder can become very disabling since

individuals often avoid places or situations where panic attacks have occurred. For example, if a panic attack strikes while you're riding an elevator, you may develop a fear of the elevator in your office building.

LIVING WITH PANIC DISORDER

Some people's lives become greatly restricted—they avoid normal, everyday activities such as grocery shopping, driving, or in some cases even leaving the house. Or, they may be able to confront a feared situation only if accompanied by a spouse or other trusted person. Basically, they avoid any situation they fear would make them feel helpless if a panic attack occurs. When people's lives become so restricted by the disorder, as happens in about one-third of all people with panic disorder, the condition is called *agoraphobia*. A tendency toward panic disorder and agoraphobia runs in families. Early treatment of panic disorder can often stop the progression to agoraphobia.

TREATING PANIC DISORDER

Studies have shown that proper treatment—a type of psychotherapy called cognitive-behavioral therapy, medications, or possibly a combination of the two—helps 70 to 90 percent of people with panic disorder. Significant improvement is usually seen within 6 to 8 weeks.

Cognitive-behavioral approaches teach patients how to view the panic situations differently and demonstrate ways to reduce anxiety, using breathing exercises or techniques to refocus attention, for example. Another technique used in cognitive-behavioral therapy, called exposure therapy, can often help alleviate the phobias that may result from panic disorder. In exposure therapy, people are very slowly exposed to the fearful situation until they become desensitized to it.

IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE PANIC DISORDER . . .

Remember, this problem is not your fault and it can be effectively treated. There is no reason to suffer in silence. Contact us for help. We provide private assessments for individuals and families. During this appointment, you'll learn more about the signs, symptoms and treatments for your illness. Take the next step. Reach out for help. Relief and recovery are the rewards.

CALL 1-800-556-6249.



DARTMOUTH-HITCHCOCK PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATES

Source: National Institute of Mental Health.