

Panic disorder is a type of anxiety disorder in which you have repeated attacks of intense fear that something bad will happen.

Panic disorder is twice as common in women as it is in men. Symptoms often begin before age 25, but may occur in the mid-30s. Panic disorder may occur in children, but it is often not diagnosed until they are older.

Causes

It's not known what causes panic attacks or panic disorder, but these factors may play a role:

Genetics

Major stress

Temperament that is more susceptible to stress

Certain changes in the way parts of your brain function

Some research suggests that your body's natural fight-or-flight response to danger is involved in panic attacks. For example, if a grizzly bear came after you, your body would react instinctively. Your heart rate and breathing would speed up as your body prepared itself for a life-threatening situation. Many of the same reactions occur in a panic attack. But it's not known why a panic attack occurs when there's no obvious danger present.

Symptoms of panic disorder often start in the late teens or early adulthood and affect more women than men.

Factors that may increase the risk of developing panic attacks or panic disorder include:

Family history of panic attacks or panic disorder

Significant stress

Death or serious illness of a loved one

Major changes in your life, such as the addition of a baby

History of childhood physical or sexual abuse

Experiencing a traumatic event, such as an accident or sexual assault

Manifestations

A panic attack begins suddenly, and most often peaks within 10 to 20 minutes. Some symptoms continue for an hour or more. A panic attack may be mistaken for a heart attack.

Panic attacks can include anxiety about being in a setting where an escape may be difficult such as being in a crowd or traveling in a car or bus. This type of panic disorder is called agoraphobia.

A person with panic disorder often lives in fear of another attack, and may be afraid to be alone or far from medical help.

People with panic disorder have at least four of the following symptoms during an attack:

Chest pain or discomfort

Dizziness or faintness

Fear of dying

Fear of losing control or impending doom
Feeling of choking
Feelings of detachment
Feelings of unreality
Nausea or upset stomach
Numbness or tingling in the hands, feet, or face
Palpitations, fast heart rate, or pounding heart
Sensation of shortness of breath or smothering
Sweating, chills, or hot flashes
Trembling or shaking

Panic attacks may change behavior and function at home, school, or work. People with the disorder often worry about the effects of their panic attacks.

People with panic disorder may abuse alcohol or other drugs. They may feel sad or depressed.

Panic attacks cannot be predicted. At least in the early stages of the disorder, there is no trigger that starts the attack. Recalling a past attack may trigger panic attacks.

Treatment

The main aim of treatment for panic disorder is to reduce the number of panic attacks that you have, and to help ease the severity of your symptoms.

The two main types of treatment for panic disorder are:

- Psychological therapy
Cognitive behavioural therapy is thought to be one of the most effective forms of treatment for panic disorder. It is a psychological treatment, and will involve you having weekly sessions where you talk to a therapist.

Support groups will be able to provide you with useful information and advice about how to effectively manage your panic disorder, and they are also a good way of meeting other people who have similar experiences of the condition.

- Medication
Antidepressants are often associated with depression, but they can also be used to treat a number of other psychological conditions.
Antidepressants can take between two to four weeks before they become effective. It is therefore important that you continue to take antidepressant medication, even if you feel that it is not working. You should only ever stop taking prescribed medication if your GP specifically advises you to do so.
The types of antidepressants that are recommended to treat panic disorder are:
 - > selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)
 - > tricyclic antidepressants

Sample Conversation

Physician: From the information you have given me as well as the exam I've performed, and the tests we ran, I would like to tell you what I think is going on. I'd like to reassure you that I found no evidence of any heart disease symptoms. Your symptoms of rapid heartbeat, palpitations, and so on do not appear to be coming from any physical problem. But your symptoms are real, and I'd like to talk with you about them.

Patient: Okay doctor. I'm listening.

Physician: Have you ever heard of an illness called panic disorder?

Patient: No, doctor.

Physician: Well, panic disorder is a problem that about 4-5% of the population suffers from. In panic disorder the person experiences symptoms much like yours, for no apparent reason.

Usually the disorder develops after a period of stress. The initial onset of the symptoms can be caused by a number of reasons, but then you begin to interpret those symptoms as a sign that there is something seriously wrong. You begin to get scared, and this in turn increases the severity of your symptoms. So it becomes a vicious cycle, where the more you focus on and worry about the symptoms the worse they get. Does that make sense? The symptoms are real physical symptoms, but they are being caused by certain thinking patterns, much like you would react in fear if you thought I had a hungry tiger in the next office.

Do you have any questions about what I've told you?

Patient: I think I'm quite enlightened by your explanation doctor. What should I do next?

Physician: What I'd like for you to do is see a behavioral psychologist who specializes in the treatment of panic disorder.

Patient: You want me to see a psychologist? Do you think I'm going crazy?

Physician: Of course not. Not all people that need the help of a psychologist are insane. Even normal people need a psychologist's expertise in dealing with their problems and crisis in life.

A psychologist will teach you a set of skills for reducing the panic feelings. Behavior therapy is an effective treatment for panic, and its effects are more reliable and more durable than drug treatments.

Patient: Okay doctor. Thanks. That makes sense.