

# Panic Attack

A panic attack is a sudden episode of severe anxiety, fear, or discomfort that causes physical and emotional symptoms. The attack may be in response to something frightening, or it may occur for no known reason.

Symptoms of a panic attack can be similar to symptoms of a heart attack or stroke. It is important to see your health care provider when you have a panic attack so that these conditions can be ruled out.

A panic attack is a symptom of another condition. Most panic attacks go away with treatment of the underlying problem. If you have panic attacks often, you may have a condition called panic disorder.

## What are the causes?

A panic attack may be caused by:

- An extreme, life-threatening situation, such as a war or natural disaster.
- An anxiety disorder, such as post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Depression.
- Certain medical conditions, including heart problems, neurological conditions, and infections.
- Certain over-the-counter and prescription medicines.
- Illegal drugs that increase heart rate and blood pressure, such as methamphetamine.
- Alcohol.
- Supplements that increase anxiety.
- Panic disorder.

## What increases the risk?

You are more likely to develop this condition if:

- You have an anxiety disorder.
- You have another mental health condition.
- You take certain medicines.
- You use alcohol, illegal drugs, or other substances.
- You are under extreme stress.
- A life event is causing increased feelings of anxiety and depression.

## What are the signs or symptoms?

A panic attack starts suddenly, usually lasts about 20 minutes, and occurs with one or more of the following:

- A pounding heart.
- A feeling that your heart is beating irregularly or faster than normal (*palpitations*).
- Sweating.
- Trembling or shaking.
- Shortness of breath or feeling smothered.
- Feeling choked.
- Chest pain or discomfort.
- Nausea or a strange feeling in your stomach.
- Dizziness, feeling lightheaded, or feeling like you might faint.
- Chills or hot flashes.

- Numbness or tingling in your lips, hands, or feet.
- Feeling confused, or feeling that you are not yourself.
- Fear of losing control or being emotionally unstable.
- Fear of dying.

## **How is this diagnosed?**

A panic attack is diagnosed with an assessment by your health care provider. During the assessment your health care provider will ask questions about:

- Your history of anxiety, depression, and panic attacks.
- Your medical history.
- Whether you drink alcohol, use illegal drugs, take supplements, or take medicines. Be honest about your substance use.

Your health care provider may also:

- Order blood tests or other kinds of tests to rule out serious medical conditions.
- Refer you to a mental health professional for further evaluation.

## **How is this treated?**

Treatment depends on the cause of the panic attack:

- If the cause is a medical problem, your health care provider will either treat that problem or refer you to a specialist.
- If the cause is emotional, you may be given anti-anxiety medicines or referred to a counselor. These medicines may reduce how often attacks happen, reduce how severe the attacks are, and lower anxiety.
- If the cause is a medicine, your health care provider may tell you to stop the medicine, change your dose, or take a different medicine.
- If the cause is a drug, treatment may involve letting the drug wear off and taking medicine to help the drug leave your body or to counteract its effects. Attacks caused by drug abuse may continue even if you stop using the drug.

## **Follow these instructions at home:**

- Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your health care provider.
- If you feel anxious, limit your caffeine intake.
- Take good care of your physical and mental health by:
  - Eating a balanced diet that includes plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, lean meats, and low-fat dairy.
  - Getting plenty of rest. Try to get 7–8 hours of uninterrupted sleep each night.
  - Exercising regularly. Try to get 30 minutes of physical activity at least 5 days a week.
  - Not smoking. Talk to your health care provider if you need help quitting.
  - Limiting alcohol intake to no more than 1 drink a day for nonpregnant women and 2 drinks a day for men. One drink equals 12 oz of beer, 5 oz of wine, or 1½ oz of hard liquor.
- Keep all follow-up visits as told by your health care provider. This is important. Panic attacks may have underlying physical or emotional problems that take time to accurately diagnose.

## **Contact a health care provider if:**

- Your symptoms do not improve, or they get worse.
- You are not able to take your medicine as prescribed because of side effects.

## **Get help right away if:**

- You have serious thoughts about hurting yourself or others.
- You have symptoms of a panic attack. **Do not** drive yourself to the hospital. Have someone else drive you or call an ambulance.

**If you ever feel like you may hurt yourself or others, or you have thoughts about taking your own life, get help right away. You can go to your nearest emergency department or call:**

- **Your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.).**
- **A suicide crisis helpline, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. This is open 24 hours a day.**

## **Summary**

- A panic attack is a sign of a serious health or mental health condition. Get help right away. Do not drive yourself to the hospital. Have someone else drive you or call an ambulance.
- Always see a health care provider to have the reasons for the panic attack correctly diagnosed.
- If your panic attack was caused by a physical problem, follow your health care provider's suggestions for medicine, referral to a specialist, and lifestyle changes.
- If your panic attack was caused by an emotional problem, follow through with counseling from a qualified mental health specialist.
- If you feel like you may hurt yourself or others, call 911 and get help right away.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.