



# Panic Disorder: When Fear Overwhelms



**Wesley Counseling**  
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National Institute  
of Mental Health

Do you sometimes have sudden attacks of anxiety and overwhelming fear that last for several minutes? Maybe your heart pounds, you sweat, and you feel like you can't breathe or think. Do these attacks occur at unpredictable times with no obvious trigger, causing you to worry about the possibility of having another one at any time?

If so, you may have a type of anxiety disorder called panic disorder. Left untreated, panic disorder can lower your quality of life because it may lead to other fears and mental health disorders, problems at work or school, and social isolation.

## What is it like to have panic disorder?

*"One day, without any warning or reason, a feeling of terrible anxiety came crashing down on me. I felt like I couldn't get enough air, no matter how hard I breathed. My heart was pounding out of my chest, and I thought I might die. I was sweating and felt dizzy. I felt like I had no control over these feelings and like I was drowning and couldn't think straight."*

*"After what seemed like an eternity, my breathing slowed and I eventually let go of the fear and my racing thoughts, but I was totally drained and exhausted. These attacks started to occur every couple of weeks, and I thought I was losing my mind. My friend saw how I was struggling and told me to call my doctor for help."*

## What is panic disorder?

People with panic disorder have sudden and repeated attacks of fear that last for several minutes or longer. These are called **panic attacks**. Panic attacks are characterized by a fear of disaster or of losing control even when there is no real danger. A person may also have a strong physical reaction during a panic attack. It may feel like having a heart attack. Panic attacks can occur at any time, and many people with panic disorder worry about and dread the possibility of having another attack.

A person with panic disorder may become discouraged and feel ashamed because he or she cannot carry out normal routines like going to school or work, going to the grocery store, or driving.

Panic disorder often begins in the late teens or early adulthood. More women than men have panic disorder. But not everyone who experiences panic attacks will develop panic disorder.

## What causes panic disorder?

Panic disorder sometimes runs in families, but no one knows for sure why some family members have it while others don't. Researchers have found that several parts of the brain, as well as biological processes, play a key role in fear and anxiety. Some researchers think that people with panic disorder misinterpret harmless bodily sensations as threats. By learning more about how the brain and body functions in people with panic disorder, scientists may be able to create better treatments. Researchers are also looking for ways in which stress and environmental factors may play a role.

# What are the signs and symptoms of panic disorder?

People with panic disorder may have:

- Sudden and repeated panic attacks of overwhelming anxiety and fear
- A feeling of being out of control, or a fear of death or impending doom during a panic attack
- Physical symptoms during a panic attack, such as a pounding or racing heart, sweating, chills, trembling, breathing problems, weakness or dizziness, tingly or numb hands, chest pain, stomach pain, and nausea
- An intense worry about when the next panic attack will happen
- A fear or avoidance of places where panic attacks have occurred in the past

# How is panic disorder treated?

First, talk to your doctor about your symptoms. Your doctor should do an exam and ask you about your health history to make sure that an unrelated physical problem is not causing your symptoms. Your doctor may refer to you a mental health specialist, such as a psychiatrist or psychologist.

Panic disorder is generally treated with psychotherapy, medication, or both. Talk with your doctor about the best treatment for you.

**Psychotherapy.** A type of psychotherapy called cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is especially useful as a first-line treatment for panic disorder. CBT teaches you different ways of thinking, behaving, and reacting to the feelings that come on with a panic attack. The attacks can begin to disappear once you learn to react differently to the physical sensations of anxiety and fear that occur during panic attacks.



**For more information on psychotherapy, see <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/psychotherapies>.**

**Medication.** Doctors also may prescribe different types of medications to help treat panic disorder:


- Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs)
- Serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)
- Beta-blockers
- Benzodiazepines

SSRIs and SNRIs are commonly used to treat depression, but they are also helpful for the symptoms of panic disorder. They may take several weeks to start working. These medications may also cause side-effects, such as headaches, nausea, or difficulty sleeping. These side effects are usually not severe for most people, especially if the dose starts off low and is increased slowly over time. **Talk to your doctor about any side effects that you have.**

Another type of medication called beta-blockers can help control some of the physical symptoms of panic disorder, such as rapid heart rate. Although doctors do not commonly prescribe beta-blockers for panic disorder, they may be helpful in certain situations that precede a panic attack.

Benzodiazepines, which are sedative medications, are powerfully effective in rapidly decreasing panic attack symptoms, but they can cause tolerance and dependence if you use them continuously. Therefore, your doctor will only prescribe them for brief periods of time if you need them.

Your doctor will work with you to find the best medication and dose for you.



For more information about these medications, see <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/mental-health-medications>. Also check the Food and Drug Administration’s website (<http://www.fda.gov/>) for the latest information on warnings, patient medication guides, or newly approved medications.

Don’t give up on treatment too quickly. Both psychotherapy and medication can take some time to work. A healthy lifestyle can also help combat panic disorder. Make sure to get enough sleep and exercise, eat a healthy diet, and turn to family and friends who you trust for support.

## Finding Help

### Mental Health Treatment Program Locator

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides this online resource for locating mental health treatment facilities and programs. The Mental Health Treatment Locator section of the Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator lists facilities providing mental health services to persons with mental illness. Find a facility in your state at <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/>. For additional resources, visit [www.nimh.nih.gov/findhelp](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/findhelp).

### Questions to Ask Your Doctor

Asking questions and providing information to your doctor or health care provider can improve your care. Talking with your doctor builds trust and leads to better results, quality, safety, and satisfaction. Visit the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality website for tips at [www.ahrq.gov/patients-consumers](http://www.ahrq.gov/patients-consumers).

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# For More Information

To learn more information about panic disorder, visit:

Medline Plus (National Library of Medicine)

**<http://medlineplus.gov>**

(En Español: **<http://medlineplus.gov/spanish>**)

For information on clinical trials, visit:

ClinicalTrials.gov: **<http://www.clinicaltrials.gov>**

(En Español: **<http://salud.nih.gov/investigacion-clinica/>**)

For more information on conditions that affect mental health, resources, and research, visit the NIMH website (**<http://www.nimh.nih.gov>**).

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National Institute  
of Mental Health

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
AND HUMAN SERVICES

National Institutes of Health

NIH Publication No. 19-MH-8077

Revised 2016

