

## **Introduction**

Agoraphobia is a type of anxiety disorder. People with agoraphobia try to avoid places or situations in which they have had panic attacks. Panic attacks are episodes of intense fear. They can feel overwhelming and may not have a known cause. If you have agoraphobia, you may try to avoid large crowds or places that have caused you panic in the past. If left untreated, agoraphobia can cause you to fear leaving your home. You may have trouble feeling safe in most places.

This reference summary explains agoraphobia. It covers the symptoms and causes of the disorder. It also talks about how agoraphobia is diagnosed and treated.

## **Agoraphobia**

Agoraphobia is a type of phobia. A phobia is an intense fear of a certain place, activity or thing. People with agoraphobia worry about having panic attacks in certain places. Worrying about having a panic attack may increase your chance of having one. This can make agoraphobia hard to treat. People with agoraphobia often feel trapped in their own home. They may not feel comfortable seeking treatment.

Agoraphobia can affect your relationships. You may be afraid to leave your house to see the people you care about. Some people with agoraphobia depend on other people to help them go out in public. Anyone can have agoraphobia. But it is more common in women than men. Agoraphobia usually starts in the late teens or early 20's.

Risk factors for agoraphobia include:

- Having an anxiety disorder.
- Stressful events, such as abuse during childhood.
- Substance abuse.



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## Symptoms

If you have agoraphobia, you may avoid certain places or situations because you do not feel safe. This feeling may get worse if a place is crowded. You may be afraid to spend time alone. You may try to avoid places that you cannot leave easily.

Agoraphobia may cause you to feel like you are losing control of your thoughts. You may have feelings that your body or the world around you is not real.

Agoraphobia can cause symptoms of panic. These include:

- Chest pain.
- Dizziness.
- Hot flashes or chills.
- Nausea.
- Numbness or tingling.

Other symptoms of panic include:

- Fast heartbeat.
- Shortness of breath.
- Shaking.
- Sweating.



## Causes

No one is exactly sure what causes agoraphobia. But it is usually started by panic disorder. Panic disorder is a type of anxiety disorder that causes panic attacks. Agoraphobia usually starts after you have a panic attack in a certain place or situation. You may then try to avoid that place or situation to prevent a repeat of the panic attack. This can make your worrying worse and increase your chance of having a panic attack.

As you have more panic attacks, you may try to avoid more places. Eventually, you may not feel safe anywhere but at your home.



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## Diagnosis

Your health care provider will talk to you about your social and medical history. He or she may ask about your symptoms and family history. Your health care provider will also perform a physical exam to rule out any physical disorders.

To be diagnosed with agoraphobia, you must meet the following conditions:

- You worry about being in specific places or situations that you cannot easily leave.
- You worry about being in places or situations in which you have had a panic attack.



Because of similar symptoms, your health care provider may try to diagnose other disorders. These can include panic disorders and social phobia.

## Treatment

Agoraphobia may be hard to treat. But symptoms can get better with treatment. Agoraphobia is typically treated with a combination of medication and counseling. Medications used to treat agoraphobia include antidepressants and anti-anxiety medications.

Antidepressant medications are usually used to treat depression. But they can also help with symptoms of anxiety and panic. They may help you feel less afraid of entering places that have caused panic in the past. Antidepressants are usually taken daily. It may take 2 weeks to 2 months to benefit from antidepressants. They are usually not addictive.

Anti-anxiety medications can help control the symptoms of panic attacks. They are usually taken when you feel that you are about to have an anxiety attack. Anti-anxiety medications can cause dependence. Your health care provider will talk with you about your symptoms and medical history to see if anti-anxiety medications are right for you.



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Therapy is also used to treat agoraphobia. The most common therapy used for agoraphobia is called cognitive behavioral therapy, or CBT. It is a common type of mental health counseling.

CBT can help you:

- Learn about your condition.
- Focus on your feelings, thoughts, moods and behaviors.
- Identify certain thought patterns that may cause panic or anxiety.
- Understand why you fear certain places or situations.

CBT can also help you teach yourself healthy behaviors. Your therapist may gradually help you face the places or situations you worry about. This is called exposure therapy.



Exposure therapy gradually helps you face the places and situations you fear while you feel safe. Your therapist may join you as you go to these places to help you feel safe. He or she might give you tips or practices to use while you go into these situations. Eventually, you may feel safe enough to go to these places on your own.

If you have agoraphobia, try not to avoid places or situations that you fear might cause a panic attack. It may be hard or uncomfortable. But going into these places will help you fear them less. Alcohol or illegal drugs may make you feel less anxious for a short period of time. But over time, they can make symptoms worse.



Exercising regularly may help with symptoms of anxiety and panic. Certain relaxation techniques, including meditation and yoga, may also help. It may be helpful to see a support group to help with agoraphobia. Talking to people who have experienced your symptoms may help you overcome your anxiety.

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## Summary

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Agoraphobia usually starts after you have a panic attack in a certain place or situation. You may try to avoid that place or situation to prevent panic attacks. This can make your worrying worse and increase your chance of having a panic attack.

To be diagnosed with agoraphobia, you must meet the following conditions:

- You worry about being in specific places or situations that you cannot easily leave.
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