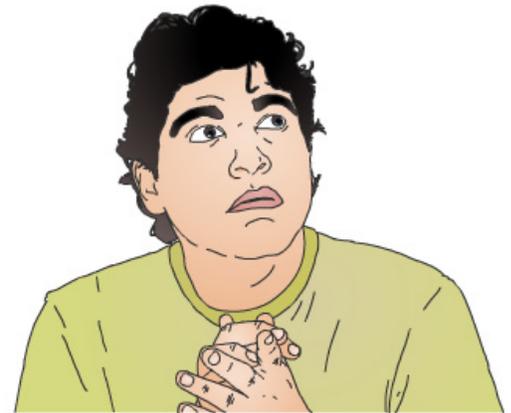


### **Introduction**

Panic disorder is a type of anxiety disorder. It causes a person to have panic attacks. A panic attack is a sudden feeling of terror for no reason.

People who suffer from panic disorder often live in constant fear of panic attacks. This fear can interfere with a person's life and trigger more panic attacks.

This reference summary discusses the causes and symptoms of panic disorder. Information about ways to treat and prevent panic attacks is also included.



### **Panic Disorder and Panic Attacks**

Imagine a person walking in a forest, and he is suddenly confronted by a wild animal such as a wolf, bear or boar. It is normal for the heart to beat fast and for the person to feel intense fear. This is the body's automatic response to prepare the person for fighting or fleeing. Now imagine another person swimming, walking or resting at home watching TV. Imagine that for no reason whatsoever, that person starts feeling the same fast heartbeat and fear as if he saw a wolf, bear or boar in the forest. This unwarranted attack of fear is an example of a panic attack.

Any person may have one or two sudden panic attacks in his or her lifetime. But if the panic attacks become frequent, then that person likely has panic disorder. Many people with panic disorder worry about and dread the possibility of having another attack. Not all panic attacks are caused by panic disorder. Drugs, substance abuse and some mental conditions can also cause panic attacks.



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To diagnose panic disorder, your health care provider has to find all of the following:

- You have repeated, sudden panic attacks for no apparent reason.
- You fear having another panic attack.
- Your panic attacks are not caused by drugs, substance abuse or another mental health condition.

## Symptoms and Complications

Physical symptoms during a panic attack include:

- Pounding or racing heart.
- Sweating.
- Breathing problems.
- Weakness or dizziness.

Other physical symptoms of a panic attack include:

- Feeling hot or a cold chill.
- Tingly or numb hands.
- Chest pain.
- Stomach pain.



Many of these symptoms resemble those of a heart attack.

Panic attacks can happen at any time without warning, and be short or long. Some attacks can last up to 30 minutes. At the end of an attack, the person feels tired and worn out.

When left untreated, panic attacks can become panic disorder. People with panic disorder have frequent panic attacks. Seeking treatment after a few panic attacks can help to prevent them from developing into panic disorder or phobias. A phobia is an extreme, irrational fear of something that may cause a person to panic. Examples of common phobias include fear of enclosed rooms, fear of crowded public places and fear of embarrassing oneself in front of other people.



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People with panic disorder may have an intense worry about when the next attack will happen. They may also avoid places where panic attacks have happened in the past.

When left untreated, panic disorder can cause serious complications that lower your quality of life. Complications associated with these conditions include:

- Problems at work or school.
- Avoiding social situations.
- Depression.

Other complications of panic disorder may include:

- Alcohol or substance abuse.
- Increased risk of suicide.
- Development of phobias such as agoraphobia.



Agoraphobia typically causes a person to be afraid to leave spaces or areas that they consider to be safe. People with panic disorder may develop agoraphobia as they try to avoid places or things that they associate with panic attacks.

## **Causes**

The exact causes of panic disorder are not fully understood. It is likely that panic disorder has many causes. Causes may include genetics, stress and changes in the way parts of your brain and glands function.

One thing that researchers have discovered is that panic disorder sometimes runs in families. But no one knows for sure why some family members have it while others do not.

Several parts of the brain are involved in fear and anxiety. By learning more about fear and anxiety in the brain, scientists may be able to create better treatments. Researchers are also looking to see what role stress and environmental factors may play. Panic attacks may be related to the body's fight-or-flight response to danger. Fear, panic and anxiety are natural responses to a stressful or dangerous situation.



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During times of stress or danger, your body releases the hormone adrenaline and other chemicals. These make you alert and ready to fight back or run away. Adrenaline is a hormone that is released in response to stress. It increases heart rate, pulse rate and blood pressure.

In people who have panic disorder, the adrenaline and other chemicals are released when no clear danger is present. More research needs to be done to discover why some people experience this reaction.



## Diagnosis

Your health care providers may run several medical and psychological tests to determine the cause of your symptoms. These often include:

- A physical exam.
- Laboratory tests to check for internal causes of your symptoms.
- A psychological evaluation to check mental and emotional health.
- During the psychological evaluation, your health care provider will want to know about your symptoms. Be prepared to talk about: When they started.
- What they feel like.
- How frequently they happen.
- How long they last.
- What you're doing when they happen.



During the psychological evaluation, your health care provider may ask about any stressful situations in your life. This includes your fears and concerns, relationship problems and any other issues that affect your life. You may be asked to fill out a questionnaire or other forms. Not everyone who experiences a panic attack has panic disorder. Your health care provider will assess the severity of your panic attacks.

For panic disorder to be diagnosed, your symptoms must fit the following criteria:

- You have unexpected, frequent attacks.
- You have been worried that you will have another attack.
- Your panic attacks aren't caused by substance abuse or another mental health condition.

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People who experience panic attacks but are not considered to have panic disorder can still benefit from treatment. Panic attacks can get worse if they are not treated. They may develop into panic disorder or phobias.

## Risk Factors

While health care providers may not know for sure what causes panic disorder, they do know of certain risk factors. A risk factor is something that increases your chance for developing a medical condition. One risk factor is gender. More women are affected by panic disorder than men. As a woman, you have an increased risk for experiencing a panic attack or developing panic disorder.

If you suffered childhood trauma, your risk of developing panic attacks or panic disorder is increased. Children who experienced abuse or trauma, even as a witness, have a higher risk of developing anxiety disorders later in life. If you regularly suffer from stress, you have an increased risk for developing panic attacks or panic disorder. Stressful life situations may cause frequent, overwhelming anxiety.



If you have a loved one who recently died or is experiencing a serious illness, your risk for developing panic attacks or panic disorder is increased. Experiencing other big changes in your life, such as the birth of a child or losing a job, also increases your risk. The genes you inherited from your parents may increase your risk for developing panic attacks or panic disorder. Anxiety disorders may run in families. This makes genetics a risk factor.

If you regularly use illegal drugs or alcohol, you are at a greater risk for developing panic attacks or panic disorder. Also, drug or alcohol abuse can make panic symptoms worse. Caffeine, nicotine and other stimulants can also increase anxiety.



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## Treatment

Panic disorder is often treated with medication and psychotherapy. The main goal of this treatment is to decrease worry and eliminate your panic attack symptoms.

Effective treatment often allows people to return to everyday activities without fear of another panic attack. Your health care provider may recommend medication, psychotherapy or a combination of the two.

You should work with your health care provider to determine which medications work best to treat your condition. Sometimes different medications need to be tried before you find one that works best for you. Never start or stop a medication without first talking to your health care provider. The medications used to treat panic disorder and panic attacks can have serious side effects, including thoughts of suicide. If you experience any side effects from a medication, contact your health care provider immediately.



Psychotherapy is another treatment option for panic disorder. Psychotherapy is a type of counseling. It is sometimes called talk therapy. Psychotherapy can help you understand your condition better and teach you ways of coping with it. The main type of psychotherapy used to treat panic attacks and panic disorder is cognitive behavioral therapy. Cognitive behavioral therapy helps you change the thinking patterns that trigger your panic attacks. It also helps change the way you react to situations that cause fear and anxiety. This can help you prevent attacks in the future.

Learning certain breathing exercises and relaxation techniques is also a part of cognitive behavioral therapy. During therapy sessions, you may be asked to confront thoughts or imagine situations that cause you to have a panic attack. This allows you to practice ways of overcoming your fears in a safe environment.



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Psychodynamic psychotherapy is another possible treatment option for panic disorder and panic attacks. This form of therapy helps you examine your unconscious thoughts and behaviors. Your therapist can help you identify any emotional conflicts that may be causing your symptoms.

## Prevention

There is no known way to prevent panic attacks or panic disorder. Because stress is a known risk factor, learning how to manage stress may help reduce the likelihood of developing panic attacks and panic disorder. Stress management includes meditation and guided imagery.

Eating healthy, exercising regularly and getting enough sleep are also essential elements of managing stress.

## Summary

Panic disorder is a type of anxiety disorder. It causes a person to have panic attacks, which are sudden feelings of terror for no reason. Not everyone who experiences a panic attack has panic disorder. People with panic disorder regularly experience panic attacks.

Physical symptoms during a panic attack may include:

- Pounding or racing heart.
- Chest pain.
- Breathing problems.
- Weakness or dizziness.

Many of the symptoms resemble those of a heart attack.

The exact causes of panic disorder are not fully understood. It is likely that panic disorder has many causes. These causes may include genetics, stress and changes in the way parts of your brain function. Panic attacks are often treated with medication and psychotherapy. The main goal of this treatment is to eliminate your panic attack symptoms. Effective treatment often allows people to return to everyday activities without fear of another panic attack.



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If you experience symptoms of a panic attack or panic disorder, talk to your health care provider right away. These conditions are difficult to manage without treatment and may become worse. Managing stress may help you reduce your chances of having a panic attack. Meditating, eating healthy, exercising regularly and getting enough sleep can help you manage stress.

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