

Panic disorder is where you have recurring and regular panic attacks, often for no apparent reason. Everyone experiences feelings of anxiety and panic at certain times during their lifetime. It's a natural response to stressful or dangerous situations.

However, for someone with panic disorder, feelings of anxiety, stress and panic occur regularly and at any time.

Anxiety is a feeling of unease. It can range from mild to severe and can include feelings of worry and fear.

There are several conditions that can cause severe anxiety including:

- phobias – an extreme or irrational fear of an object, place, situation, feeling or animal
- generalised anxiety disorder (GAD) – a long-term condition that causes excessive anxiety and worry relating to a variety of situations
- post-traumatic stress disorder – a condition with psychological and physical symptoms caused by distressing or frightening events

A panic attack occurs when your body experiences a rush of intense psychological (mental) and physical symptoms.

The symptoms of a panic attack can be very frightening and distressing. Symptoms tend to occur suddenly, without warning and often for no apparent reason. As well as overwhelming feelings of anxiety, a panic attack can also cause a variety of other symptoms, including:

- a sensation that your heart is beating irregularly (palpitations)
- sweating
- trembling
- hot flushes
- chills
- shortness of breath
- a choking sensation
- chest pain
- nausea
- dizziness
- feeling faint
- numbness or pins and needles
- dry mouth
- a need to go to the toilet
- ringing in your ears
- a feeling of dread or a fear of dying

- a churning stomach
- a tingling sensation in your fingers
- shivering
- shaking

The physical symptoms of a panic attack are unpleasant, and they can also be accompanied by thoughts of fear and terror.

For this reason, people with panic disorder start to fear the next attack, which creates a cycle of living in 'fear of fear' and adds to the sense of panic. Sometimes, the symptoms of a panic attack can be so intense they can make you feel like you're having a heart attack.

However, it's important to be aware that symptoms such as a racing heartbeat and shortness of breath won't result in you having a heart attack. Although panic attacks can often be frightening, they don't cause any physical harm. People who have had panic disorder for some time usually learn to recognise this 'heart attack sensation' and become more aware of how to control their symptoms.

Most panic attacks last for five to 20 minutes. Some attacks have been reported to have lasted up to an hour. However, it's likely that in these cases one attack occurred straight after another or high levels of anxiety were felt after the first attack.

The number of panic attacks you have will

depend on how severe your condition is. Some people may have one or two attacks each month, while others may have several attacks a week.

Panic attacks can be very frightening and intense, but they're not dangerous. An attack won't cause you any physical harm, and it's unlikely that you'll be admitted to hospital if you've had a panic attack.

As with many mental health conditions, the exact cause of panic disorder isn't fully understood.

However, it's thought the condition is probably linked to a combination of physical and psychological factors.

See your GP if you have symptoms of anxiety or panic disorder.

You may be diagnosed with panic disorder if you experience recurrent and unexpected panic attacks followed by at least one month of continuous worry or concern about having further attacks.

— NHS, UK



Panic Disorder

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