

Panic attacks

A panic attack is when your body experiences a rush of intense psychological (mental) and physical symptoms. You may feel an overwhelming sense of fear, apprehension and anxiety. As well as these feelings, you may also experience physical symptoms, such as nausea, sweating, trembling and a sensation that your heart is beating irregularly (palpitations). A panic attack can be very frightening and intense, but it is not dangerous. It will not cause you any physical harm.

At least one person in 10 experiences occasional panic attacks, which are usually triggered by a stressful event or situation. However, people with panic disorder have recurring and regular attacks, often for no apparent reason. The number of panic attacks that you have will depend on the severity of your condition. Some people may have one or two attacks each month, while others may have several attacks a week. Because panic disorder is a very unpredictable condition it leaves affected people feeling constantly **anxious** and concerned about when their next attack will be. In the UK, approximately one person in 100 has panic disorder. Most people first develop the disorder during their 20s, and it is approximately twice as common in women as it is in men.

Symptoms of panic disorder

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

- sensation that your heart is beating irregularly (palpitations),
- sweating,
- trembling,
- hot flushes,
- chills,
- shortness of breath,
- 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, and
- a feeling of dread, or a fear of dying.

The symptoms of a panic attack can be so intense that it can make you feel like you are having a heart attack. The fear of having a heart attack can then add to your sense of panic. However, it is important to be aware that symptoms such as a racing heart beat, or shortness of breath, will not actually lead to you having a heart attack. Although frightening, a panic attack will not cause you any physical harm. People who have had panic disorder for some time will usually learn to recognise this 'heart attack sensation', and will be more aware of how to control their symptoms. The symptoms of a panic attack normally peak within 10 minutes. Most attacks will last for five to 30 minutes.

Recurrent panic attacks

People with panic disorder have panic attacks on a recurring basis. Some people with the condition have panic attacks once or twice a month, while others have attacks several times a week. People with panic disorder also tend to have ongoing and constant feelings of worry and anxiety. Because panic attacks can be very unpredictable, if you have panic disorder, you may feel stressed and worried about when your next attack will be.

Depersonalisation

During a panic attack, your symptoms can feel so intense and out of your control that you may feel detached from the situation, almost as though you are an observer. It can make the situation seem very 'unreal'. This sense of detachment is known as depersonalisation. Being detached from the situation does not provide any relief, or make a panic attack less frightening. Instead, it often makes the experience more confusing and disorientating.

Causes of panic disorder

As with many conditions that affect your mental health, the exact cause of panic disorder is not yet fully understood. It is thought that the disorder is most likely caused by a combination of physical and psychological factors. Some of these factors are outlined below.

- ***Stressful or traumatic experiences in your life***, such as a ***bereavement***, can sometimes trigger feelings of panic and anxiety. These feelings may be apparent soon after the event, or they may unexpectedly be triggered years later.
- ***Having a close family member with panic disorder*** may increase your risk of developing the condition. However, the precise nature of the risk is not yet known.
- ***Neurotransmitters*** are chemicals that occur naturally in your brain. It is thought that if you have an imbalance of these chemicals, it may increase your risk of getting conditions such as panic disorder.

Fight or flight reflex

Some researchers believe that panic disorder is closely associated with your body's natural 'fight or flight reflex'. This reflex is your body's way of protecting you from stressful and dangerous situations.

In a dangerous situation, anxiety and fear trigger your body to release hormones, such as adrenalin. This causes your breathing and heart rate to increase, helping you to prepare you for the situation. When you are faced with a dangerous or frightening situation, your body reacts in a very similar way to a panic attack. However, with panic disorder, there is usually no obvious trigger for your symptoms. Researchers believe that your fight or flight reflex may be triggered abnormally in people who have panic disorder.