

Anxiety & Panic

What Is Panic Disorder?

When panic attacks occur repeatedly, without warning, it is called panic disorder. These attacks can happen many times every day or every week. Panic disorder is one of the most common types of anxiety disorders, especially for people with heart disease. People with this disorder might worry about having these attacks throughout the day. It can get in the way of your work and personal life.

It is important to get treatment for your anxiety and panic because it has been shown to be a risk factor for heart disease.

How Does It Occur?

Panic is a “fight or flight” reaction. It is an adrenaline surge that goes wrong. Why it happens is not completely understood. Scientists know that certain parts of the brain and nervous system cause the emotional and physical surge of fear. A panic attack is very scary, but having one attack doesn’t usually mean that you are developing panic disorder. Panic disorder can happen at any time, but most often begins when you are a teenager or a young adult.

Many people with panic disorder also have ‘agoraphobia’. This means that you avoid going places or doing things because you are afraid you will panic and have no help. Or you are worried you will have a panic and people will notice which might be embarrassing. It is common for a person to have depression along with panic disorder.

What Are the Symptoms?

When a person has at least four (4) of these symptoms at the same time, it usually means the person is having a panic attack:

- feeling intense fear and being afraid that something terrible is about to happen
- worrying about losing control
- worrying about dying, going crazy, or having a heart attack
- having many body symptoms such as a pounding heart, chest pain, upset stomach, diarrhea, shaking, sweating, or being hot or cold
- feeling like you are choking or shortness of breath
- being dizzy, faint, or light-headed
- numb or tingling arms, legs, or other parts of the body
- feeling detached or as if you are watching yourself from outside your body.

These feelings start suddenly and become very strong, usually within 10 minutes. The attacks are often ‘come out of the blue’. The symptoms of panic disorder are the same as a panic attack except the person is quite fearful between attacks that another attack will happen. The person also does things differently to avoid another panic attack.

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How Is It Diagnosed?

Your health care provider or a mental health professional can tell you if your symptoms are caused by panic disorder. You will be asked about your symptoms and any drug or alcohol use. No blood tests can diagnose panic disorder.

If you worry about having another panic attack, or have the symptoms of panic attacks for more than 30 days, it usually means that you have panic disorder.

How Is It Treated?

Panic disorder can be successfully treated with psychotherapy and medicine. Do not try to deal with panic disorder all by yourself. Discuss these treatment choices with your doctor or a mental health professional.

Medicine

Several medicines can help treat panic disorder. Your doctor will carefully select the best one for you. No non-prescription medicines are available to treat panic disorder.

Psychotherapy

Studies have shown that seeing a psychologist or other mental health professional is helpful. The treatment for Panic Disorder is usually short-term (6-10 sessions, on average). A form of therapy that is very helpful with panic disorder is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). CBT is a way to help you identify and change thoughts that lead to panic attacks. Replacing negative thoughts with more positive ones can help you to control panic attacks and the fear that a panic attack will happen.

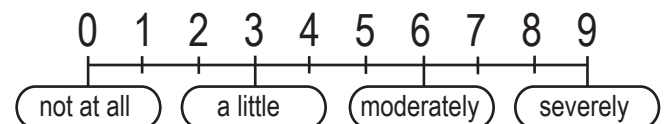
What Can I Do to Help Myself?

Here are some activities that can help control panic disorder:

- Exercise for at least 20 minutes every day. For example, take a brisk walk.
- Learn which activities make you feel better and do them often.
- Talk to your family and friends.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Get 6 to 8 hours of sleep per night.
- Keep a regular schedule for going to sleep and getting up.
- Try not to use alcohol or drugs.
- Learn relaxation techniques or yoga.
- Don't get too focused on trying to avoid panic. The more you focus on it, the worse it will probably get.

When Should I Seek Help?

Ask yourself the following question. Over the last two weeks how much have I been bothered by feeling anxious or nervous?



If you scored a 4 or more, it would be good to talk to your healthcare provider or a mental health professional about how you feel.

Most communities in BC have Mental Health Centers where you can find treatment for anxiety and/or panic. This treatment is usually free. You can also talk to your clinic nurse, or your family doctor, about other options that may be available to you.