

# Panic Disorder

## Panic attacks and agoraphobia

### What is panic disorder?

*Panic disorder* is a common condition in which a person has uncomfortable episodes of fear or anxiety that occur suddenly (often without warning). The attacks—called *panic attacks*—can last from minutes to hours. They may occur only seldomly, or quite frequently. The cause, or “trigger,” for these attacks may not be obvious.

### What happens during a panic attack?

Panic attacks are often associated with physical symptoms such as shaking, heart palpitations (a feeling that the heart is pounding), sweating, chest pain, shortness of breath, a feeling of choking, nausea, cramping, diarrhea, dizziness, an out-of-body sensation (a feeling of being apart from oneself), tingling in the hands, chills or hot flashes, and headache. A person may also have an extreme fear of dying, losing control or going crazy during a panic attack. It is very rare for a person to have all of these symptoms, although the presence of at least four symptoms strongly suggests the diagnosis of panic disorder.

Often, just the fear of having the symptoms of a panic attack is enough to trigger the symptoms. This is the basis for *agoraphobia*. With agoraphobia, a person finds it difficult to leave home or another safe area because of the fear of having a panic attack in public or of not having an easy way to escape if the symptoms start.

Many of the symptoms that occur during a panic attack are the same as the symptoms of diseases of the heart, lung, intestine or nervous system. The similarities of panic disorder to other diseases may add to the person’s fear and anxiety during and after a panic attack.

### Should I seek treatment if I’m having panic attacks?

Because of embarrassment or the fear of taking medicine, many persons who have panic attacks do not seek medical care. These people avoid the simple treatments that can help control their problem. If you have panic attacks, it is very important to seek medical care and discuss your problem with your doctor. After you have been evaluated thoroughly, your doctor will be able to tell you if the panic attacks are related to panic disorder or are caused by another problem.

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## Will any medicines help my panic disorder?

Several medicines make panic attacks less severe or stop them altogether. The most commonly used drugs are *antidepressants* and *tranquilizers*.

Some of the many antidepressants are Tofranil, Elavil, Pamelor, Anafranil, Prozac and Paxil. Besides treating depression, these medicines have many other uses, and you do not have to be depressed for them to help. Antidepressants are very effective in preventing anxiety and panic attacks, and they often completely stop the attacks. Side effects rarely occur with antidepressants. If they do occur, they are usually mild. Antidepressants will not make you lose control, and they will not change your personality. These medicines can be used for as long as necessary, even for years.

Of the many tranquilizers, the most commonly used are Xanax, Valium, Klonopin, Ativan and Serax. These medicines work by giving relief from fear and anxiety. They should be used for only a short period of time (a few weeks to a few months), unless you absolutely cannot function without them. Never suddenly stop taking them. If you want to stop, they should be slowly tapered off over several weeks under your doctor's supervision.

## Would counseling help?

Several kinds of psychologic counseling are very effective for treating panic disorder and are as effective as medicine. Counseling does not work as fast as medicine. The combination of both psychologic counseling and medicine seems to be the best treatment for panic disorder.

## How long does treatment last?

How long treatment should continue depends on you. The complete elimination of panic attacks is a reasonable goal. Your doctor will design a treatment plan just for you. A treatment period lasting at least six to nine months is usually recommended. Some people with panic disorder are able to stop taking medicine after only a short time, and some people need treatments over long periods of time or even for their lifetime.

## Who can I contact for more information?



For more information about panic attacks, panic disorder and agoraphobia, and perhaps for the location of support groups in your area, you can write or call one of the following:

Anxiety Disorders Association of America  
6000 Executive Blvd.  
Suite 513  
Rockville, MD 20852  
Telephone: 301-231-9350

National Institute of Mental Health  
NIMH Clinical Center  
Building 10 3N234  
Bethesda, MD 20892  
Telephone: 800-64-PANIC (647-2642)



This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

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