

# Panic Disorder:

When Fear  
Overwhelms



National Institute  
of Mental Health

**Do you sometimes have sudden attacks of anxiety and overwhelming fear that last for several minutes? Maybe your heart pounds, you sweat, and you feel like you can't breathe or think clearly. Do these attacks occur at unpredictable times with no apparent trigger, causing you to worry about the possibility of having another one at any time?**

**An untreated panic disorder can affect your quality of life and lead to difficulties at work or school. The good news is panic disorder is treatable. Learn more about the symptoms of panic disorder and how to find help.**

## **What is panic disorder?**

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People with panic disorder have frequent and unexpected panic attacks. These attacks are characterized by a sudden wave of fear or discomfort or a sense of losing control even when there is no clear danger or trigger. Not everyone who experiences a panic attack will develop panic disorder.

Panic attacks often include physical symptoms that might feel like a heart attack, such as trembling, tingling, or rapid heart rate. Panic attacks can occur at any time. Many people with panic disorder worry about the possibility of having another attack and may significantly change their life to avoid having another attack. Panic attacks can occur as frequently as several times a day or as rarely as a few times a year.

Panic disorder often begins in the late teens or early adulthood. Women are more likely than men to develop panic disorder.

## What are the signs and symptoms of panic disorder?

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People with panic disorder may have:

- Sudden and repeated panic attacks of overwhelming anxiety and fear
- A feeling of being out of control, or a fear of death or impending doom during a panic attack
- An intense worry about when the next panic attack will happen
- A fear or avoidance of places where panic attacks have occurred in the past
- Physical symptoms during a panic attack, such as:
  - Pounding or racing heart
  - Sweating
  - Chills
  - Trembling
  - Difficulty breathing
  - Weakness or dizziness
  - Tingly or numb hands
  - Chest pain
  - Stomach pain or nausea

## What causes panic disorder?

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Panic disorder sometimes runs in families, but no one knows for sure why some family members have it while others don't. Researchers have found that several parts of the brain and certain biological processes may play a crucial role in fear and anxiety. Some researchers think panic attacks are like "false alarms" where our body's typical survival instincts are active either too often, too strongly, or some combination of the two. For example, someone with panic disorder might feel their heart pounding and assume they're having a heart attack. This may lead to a vicious cycle, causing a person to experience panic attacks seemingly out of the blue, the central feature of panic disorder. Researchers are studying how the brain and body interact in people with panic disorder to create more specialized treatments. In addition, researchers are looking at the ways stress and environmental factors play a role in the disorder.

## How is panic disorder treated?

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If you're experiencing symptoms of panic disorder, talk to a health care provider. After discussing your history, a health care provider may conduct a physical exam to ensure that an unrelated physical problem is not causing your symptoms. A health care provider may refer you to a mental health professional, such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, or clinical social worker. The first step to effective treatment is to get a diagnosis, usually from a mental health professional.

Panic disorder is generally treated with psychotherapy (sometimes called “talk therapy”), medication, or both. Speak with a health care provider about the best treatment for you.

### Psychotherapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), a research-supported type of psychotherapy, is commonly used to treat panic disorder. CBT teaches you different ways of thinking, behaving, and reacting to the feelings that happen during or before a panic attack. The attacks can become less frequent once you learn to react differently to the physical sensations of anxiety and fear during a panic attack.

Exposure therapy is a common CBT method that focuses on confronting the fears and beliefs associated with panic disorder to help you engage in activities you have been avoiding. Exposure therapy is sometimes used along with relaxation exercises.

For more information on psychotherapy, visit [www.nimh.nih.gov/psychotherapies](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/psychotherapies).

### Medication

Health care providers may prescribe medication to treat panic disorder. Different types of medication can be effective, including:

- Antidepressants, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs)
- Beta-blockers
- Anti-anxiety medications, such as benzodiazepines

SSRI and SNRI antidepressants are commonly used to treat depression, but they also can help treat the symptoms of panic disorder. They may take several weeks to start working. These medications also may cause side effects, such as headaches, nausea, or difficulty sleeping. These side effects are usually not severe, especially if the dose starts off low and is increased slowly over time. Talk to your health care provider about any side effects that you may experience.

Beta-blockers can help control some of the physical symptoms of panic disorder, such as rapid heart rate, sweating, and tremors. Although health care providers do not commonly prescribe beta-blockers for panic disorder, the medication may be helpful in certain situations that precede a panic attack.

Benzodiazepines, which are anti-anxiety sedative medications, can be very effective in rapidly decreasing panic attack symptoms. However, some people build up a tolerance to these medications and need higher and higher doses to get the same effect. Some people even become dependent on them. Therefore, a health care provider may prescribe them only for brief periods of time if you need them.

Both psychotherapy and medication can take some time to work. Many people try more than one medication before finding the best one for them. A health care provider can work with you to find the best medication, dose, and duration of treatment for you. A healthy lifestyle also can help combat panic disorder. Make sure to get enough sleep and exercise, eat a healthy diet, and turn to family and friends who you trust for support. To learn more ways to take care of your mental health, visit [www.nimh.nih.gov/mymentalhealth](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/mymentalhealth).

For more information about medications used to treat panic disorder, visit [www.nimh.nih.gov/medications](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/medications). Visit the Food and Drug Administration's website ([www.fda.gov/drugsatfda](http://www.fda.gov/drugsatfda)) for the latest warnings, patient medication guides, and information on newly approved medications.

## How can I support myself and others with panic disorder?

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### Educate Yourself

A good way to help yourself or a loved one who may be struggling with panic attacks or panic disorder is to seek information. Research the warning signs, learn about treatment options, and keep up to date with current research.

### Communicate

If you are experiencing panic disorder symptoms, have an honest conversation about how you're feeling with someone you trust. If you think that a friend or family member may be struggling with panic disorder, set aside a time to talk with them to express your concern and reassure them of your support.

### Know When to Seek Help

If your anxiety, or the anxiety of a loved one, starts to cause problems in everyday life—such as at school, at work, or with friends and family—it's time to seek professional help. Talk to a health care provider about your mental health.

## Are there clinical trials studying panic disorder?

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NIMH supports a wide range of research, including clinical trials that look at new ways to prevent, detect, or treat diseases and conditions—including panic disorder. Although individuals may benefit from being part of a clinical trial, participants should be aware that the primary purpose of a clinical trial is to gain new scientific knowledge so that others may be better helped in the future.

Researchers at NIMH and around the country conduct clinical trials with patients and healthy volunteers. Talk to a health care provider about clinical trials, their benefits and risks, and whether one is right for you. For more information, visit [www.nimh.nih.gov/clinicaltrials](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/clinicaltrials).

## Finding Help

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### Behavioral Health Treatment Services Locator

This online resource, provided by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, helps you locate mental health treatment facilities and programs. Find a facility in your state at <https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>. For additional resources, visit [www.nimh.nih.gov/findhelp](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/findhelp).

### Talking to a Health Care Provider About Your Mental Health

Communicating well with a health care provider can improve your care and help you both make good choices about your health. Find tips to help prepare for and get the most out of your visit at [www.nimh.nih.gov/talkingtips](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/talkingtips). For additional resources, including questions to ask a provider, visit the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality website at [www.ahrq.gov/questions](http://www.ahrq.gov/questions).

If you or someone you know is in immediate distress or is thinking about hurting themselves, call the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** toll-free at 1-800-273-TALK (8255). You also can text the **Crisis Text Line** (HELLO to 741741) or use the Lifeline Chat on the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline website at <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org>.

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## For More Information

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NIMH website

[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

[www.nimh.nih.gov/espanol](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/espanol) (en español)

Medline Plus (National Library of Medicine)

<https://medlineplus.gov>

<https://medlineplus.gov/spanish> (en español)

ClinicalTrials.gov

[www.clinicaltrials.gov](http://www.clinicaltrials.gov)

<http://salud.nih.gov/investigacion-clinica> (en español)

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