

Panic Disorder: What it is and what you can do about it



Panic disorder makes you feel like you are in danger when you are really having symptoms of fear or anxiety.

Our bodies have a built-in system that warns us when we are in danger and need to act fast. Sometimes, a warning goes off at the wrong time or for no obvious reason. These false alarms are called panic attacks. They can happen when you are under stress or having a difficult time. During a panic attack, it may be hard to breathe and your heart may beat faster. You may feel dizzy, lightheaded, or sick to your stomach.

When people have panic attacks often, they may become very afraid of having another one. This is called panic disorder. Some people with panic disorder avoid certain places or situations because they are afraid of being trapped or helpless. This is called agoraphobia.

What causes panic disorder?

Panic disorder is caused by a combination of:

- Biological factors
- Past experiences or beliefs
- Stress

Once panic disorder develops, fear keeps it going. Avoiding situations that scare you can increase the feeling that there is something to be afraid of. You can overcome panic disorder by doing the things that you fear.

Getting better is often a matter of feeling the fear and doing what scares you anyway.

Treatment goals

As you think about your treatment choices, it is helpful to think about your goals. For example, you may want to:

- Feel more in control of your panic and anxiety
- Go out more
- Be able to cope with situations that make you anxious
- Improve your quality of life

Treatment options

There are two effective treatments for panic disorder. Your doctor can help you decide how these treatments can help you.

Cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT) is the best treatment for Panic Disorder. It can help you reduce or get past your fear and face the situations you are afraid of. The therapy works by changing negative patterns of thinking and behavior.

CBT is usually done in a therapy group where you will feel less alone and get support from other group members. You can learn and practice the skills that will help you overcome panic, phobias, and anxiety.

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You will learn new skills to practice with your therapist and at home, which will make you less sensitive to feelings of panic. If you have problems going out, CBT will teach you how to face these situations and regain your confidence.

The benefits of CBT last long after your therapy is over. Everyone with panic disorder can benefit from CBT.

Medications usually help relieve the effects of panic disorder during the time that you are taking them. Anti-depressant medications are commonly used to treat Panic Disorder. They are used along with Cognitive Behavior Therapy. Sometimes, tranquilizers are used for a short period of time, usually before CBT.

Medications may cause some side effects that usually decrease over time. While you are taking medication, you will meet regularly with a psychiatrist to see how you are doing.

Combining treatments

Panic disorder is sometimes treated with both CBT and medication. If you have panic disorder with:

- Mild to no agoraphobia, CBT works best alone. Taking medication and doing CBT may lead to poorer long-term results than using CBT by itself. If you choose to do both treatments, it is best to start CBT when you begin to taper off your medication. That way, CBT will help you cope with any anxiety and fear when your panic sensations return.
- Moderate to severe agoraphobia can be treated with CBT alone or with CBT and medication. Medication alone usually does not work as well. If your condition is severe and you are not doing well at work, at home, or in relationships, your doctor may recommend that you use both treatments, especially if your symptoms do not improve with CBT alone.

Other options

Some people feel that they need additional therapy to help with problems other than panic disorder. In this case, your health care provider may recommend that

Additional resources

- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, Healthy Living classes, and much more.
- Anxiety Disorders Association of America: (901) 231-9350 or adaa.org
- National Institute of Mental Health: (800) 64 PANIC (674-2642); (301) 443-4513 or nimh.nih.gov
- If you are hit, hurt, or threatened by a partner or spouse, this can seriously affect your health, including your anxiety and panic disorder. There is help. Call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-7233 or connect to ndvh.org.

you go to another therapy group or try individual therapy. CBT is the only type of therapy that has been shown to be effective for panic disorder. Other therapies and relaxation training are not as effective on their own. This is why combined treatment is sometimes a good choice. Your doctor can help you find the best treatment plan.