

PANIC DISORDER

What is Panic Disorder?

Panic attacks can occur at any time, anywhere: sitting in a movie theatre, shopping, or driving.

A panic attack is a sudden and unexpected episode of intense and overwhelming fear that has a distinct beginning and end point. The fear is accompanied by other physical symptoms that often mimic heart attacks or being suffocated. In a panic attack, the physical symptoms come to a peak within 10 minutes of starting. Often with panic attacks, you feel as if something terrible is about to happen. You feel like you must flee or escape.

Roughly one person in seven will experience at least one panic attack during his or her lifetime. This does not mean the person is suffering from Panic Disorder, nor does it mean the person will develop Panic Disorder. A true diagnosis of Panic Disorder is made when a person has experienced more than one panic attack, and the panic attack was unexpected.

Panic Disorder is a medical illness. A person with Panic Disorder will experience repeated panic attacks that are accompanied by several of the following symptoms:

- Chest pain, pressure or discomfort.
- Heart palpitations or rapid heart beat.
- Difficulty breathing or catching your breath.
- A choking sensation or lump in the throat.
- Excessive sweating; light-headedness or dizziness.
- Tingling or numbness in parts of the body.
- Chills or hot flashes; shaking or trembling or feelings of unreality or of being detached from the body.

After having a panic attack, it is not unusual for a person to feel as if they are going crazy or having a “nervous breakdown”. In fact, many people will continue to feel this way long after the initial panic attack has occurred. Many people begin to feel intense anxiety about the possibility of having more attacks. If untreated, many sufferers begin to avoid situations or places where they fear panic attacks will strike. This avoidance of situations where escape might be difficult or in which help may not be available can develop into a serious anxiety disorder of its own called **agoraphobia**. Agoraphobia develops when the person learns to fear having another attack in the same place or in a location where it would be difficult to get help. If agoraphobia becomes severe enough, the person may become housebound and unable to perform normal daily activities.

Panic Disorder is often misunderstood. People with the disorder may spend months or years trying to find an explanation for what they feel are mysterious physical symptoms. Others won't seek treatment because they are embarrassed, think their condition is just due to stress, or they are afraid of what the doctor will diagnose.

The truth about Panic Disorder

- Panic Disorder is a medical illness.
- 4% of the population will experience at least one panic attack in their lifetime.