



When Fear Overwhelms:
Panic Disorder

Easy To Read

National Institute of Mental Health

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES • National Institutes of Health

Panic Disorder

Anxiety Disorders

People with anxiety disorders feel extremely fearful and unsure. Most people feel anxious about something for a short time now and again, but people with anxiety disorders feel this way most of the time. Their fears and worries make it hard for them to do everyday tasks. About 18% of American adults have anxiety disorders. Children also may have them.

Treatment is available for people with anxiety disorders. Researchers are also looking for new treatments that will help relieve symptoms.

This booklet is about one kind of anxiety disorder called panic disorder. For information about other kinds of anxiety disorders, please see the end of this booklet.



Panic Disorder

People with panic disorder have sudden and repeated attacks of fear that last for several minutes, but sometimes symptoms may last longer. These are called panic attacks. Panic attacks are characterized by a fear of certain disaster or a fear of losing control. A person may also have a strong physical reaction. It may feel like having a heart attack. Panic attacks can occur at any time, and many people worry about and dread the possibility of having another attack.

A person with panic disorder may become discouraged and feel ashamed because he or she cannot carry out normal routines like going to the grocery store, or driving. Having panic disorder can also interfere with school or work.

**Panic attacks are characterized
by a fear of certain disaster or
a fear of losing control.**

What are the symptoms of panic disorder?

People with panic disorder have:

- **sudden and repeated attacks of fear.**
- **a feeling of being out of control** during a panic attack.
- **a feeling that things are not real.**
- **an intense worry** about when the next attack will happen.
- **a fear or avoidance of places** where panic attacks have occurred in the past.
- **physical symptoms including:**
 - pounding heart,
 - sweating,
 - weakness, faintness, or dizziness,
 - feeling a hot flush or a cold chill,
 - tingly or numb hands,
 - chest pain,
 - feeling nauseous or stomach pain.

If you or someone you know develops these symptoms, talk to a doctor or health care provider.

There is help available.

When does panic disorder start?

Panic disorder often begins in the late teens or early adulthood. More women than men have panic disorder. But not everyone who experiences panic attacks will develop panic disorder.

Is there help?

There is help for people with panic disorder. In fact, it is one of the most treatable anxiety disorders. First, a person should visit a doctor or health care provider to discuss the symptoms or feelings he or she is having. The list of symptoms in this brochure can be a useful guide when talking with the doctor. The doctor will do an examination to make sure that another physical problem is not causing the symptoms. The doctor may make a referral to a specialist such as a psychiatrist, psychologist or licensed social worker.

**Panic disorder is one of the most
treatable anxiety disorders.**

Medications can help reduce the severity and frequency of panic attacks, but they may take several weeks to start working. A doctor can prescribe medications. Different types of medications are used to treat panic disorder. They are antidepressants, anti-anxiety drugs, and beta blockers. These same medications are used to treat other types of disorders as well.

Psychotherapy, or “talk therapy” with a specialist can help people learn to control the symptoms of a panic attack. Therapy can be with a licensed social worker, counselor, psychologist or psychiatrist. There is no cure for panic disorder, but most people can live a normal life when they receive treatment with medicine and/or therapy.

If you know someone with symptoms of panic disorder, talk to him or her about seeing a doctor. Offer to go with your friend to the doctor’s appointment for support. **To find out more about panic disorder, call 1-866-615-NIMH (1-866-615-6464).**

Who pays for treatment?

Most insurance plans cover treatment for anxiety disorders. Check with your insurance company to find out. If you do not have insurance, the health or human services agency of your city or county government may offer care at a clinic or health center where payment is usually based on a person's income. If you receive Medicaid, the plan you are in may pay for treatment.

Why do people get panic disorder?

Panic disorder sometimes runs in families, but no one knows for sure why some people have it, while others don't. When chemicals in the brain are not at a certain level it can cause a person to have panic disorder. That is why medications often help with symptoms because they help the brain chemicals stay at the correct levels.

To improve treatment, scientists are studying how well different medicines and therapies work. In one kind of research, people with panic disorder choose to take part in a clinical trial to help doctors find out what treatments work best for most people, or what works best for different symptoms. Usually, the treatment is free. Scientists are learning more about how the brain works so that they can discover new treatments.



Personal story

“One day, without any warning or reason, I felt terrified. I was so afraid, I thought I was going to die. My heart was pounding and my head was spinning. I would get these feelings every couple of weeks. I thought I was losing my mind.”

“The more attacks I had, the more afraid I got. I was always living in fear. I didn’t know when I might have another attack. I became so afraid that I didn’t want to leave my house.”

“My friend saw how afraid I was and told me to call my doctor for help. My doctor told me I have panic disorder. My doctor gave me medicine that helps me feel less afraid. I’ve also been working with a counselor learning ways to cope with my fear. I had to work hard, but after a few months of medicine and therapy, I’m starting to feel like myself again.”

For More Information on Panic Disorder and Other Anxiety Disorders

Visit the National Library of Medicine's MedlinePlus www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus
En Español, <http://medlineplus.gov/spanish>

For Information on Clinical Trials for Panic Disorder and Other Anxiety Disorders

NIMH Clinical Trials Web page
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/trials/index.shtml>

National Library of Medicine Clinical Trials Database
www.clinicaltrials.gov

Information from NIMH is available in multiple formats. You can browse online, download documents in PDF, and order paper brochures by mail. You can order NIMH publications online at www.nimh.nih.gov. If you do not have Internet access, please contact the NIMH Information Center at the numbers listed below.

For Further Information

National Institute of Mental Health

Science Writing, Press, & Dissemination Branch
6001 Executive Boulevard
Room 8184, MSC 9663
Bethesda, MD 20892-9663
Phone: 301-443-4513 or
1-866-615-NIMH (6464) toll-free
TTY: 301-443-8431
TTY: 866-415-8051 toll-free
FAX: 301-443-4279
E-mail: nimhinfo@nih.gov
Web site: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

This publication is in the public domain and may be reproduced or copied without permission from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). NIMH encourages you to reproduce this publication and use it in your efforts to improve public health. Citation of the NIMH as a source is appreciated. However, using government materials inappropriately can raise legal or ethical concerns, so we ask you to use these guidelines:

- NIMH does not endorse or recommend any commercial products, processes, or services and this publication may not be used for advertising or endorsement purposes.
- NIMH does not provide specific medical advice or treatment recommendations or referrals; these materials may not be used in a manner that has the appearance of such information.
- NIMH requests that Non-Federal organizations not alter this publication in a way that will jeopardize the integrity and “brand” when using the publication.
- Addition of Non-Federal Government logos and Web site links may not have the appearance of NIMH endorsement of any specific commercial products or services or medical treatments or services.

If you have questions regarding these guidelines and use of NIMH publications, please contact the NIMH Information Center at 1-866-615-6464 or e-mail at nimhinfo@nih.gov.



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
National Institutes of Health
NIH Publication No. 08-4679
Revised 2008