

Understanding Panic Attacks

Patient questions & answers · Seven practical FAQs

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01 What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is a sudden episode of intense fear or discomfort. It may happen without an obvious immediate danger. A person can feel frightened by both the emotional experience and the physical sensations. A panic attack does not, by itself, establish a diagnosis of panic disorder.

02 What symptoms can occur?

Possible symptoms include a racing heart, sweating, trembling, breathlessness, dizziness, nausea, chest discomfort and a feeling of losing control. Not everyone experiences the same symptoms. Similar symptoms can also occur with physical medical conditions.

03 Why can the physical symptoms feel so frightening?

Changes such as a pounding heart or rapid breathing can make someone fear that something serious is happening. That fear may intensify the experience. Because symptoms can overlap with other illnesses, new or unusual symptoms should not automatically be labeled as panic.

04 Does having one panic attack mean I have panic disorder?

No. A single attack does not necessarily mean panic disorder. Clinicians consider whether attacks recur unexpectedly, whether there is persistent fear of further attacks, and whether daily life or behavior has changed. A qualified professional can assess what the symptoms mean.

05 What should I do if I experience similar symptoms again?

If you have already been medically assessed and recognize a previously discussed pattern, follow the management plan agreed with your clinician. This may include strategies for responding to frightening sensations. If symptoms are new, different or concerning, seek medical assessment rather than assuming the cause.

06 When should I seek urgent medical attention?

Seek urgent medical help for new or severe chest pain, severe breathing difficulty, fainting or other sudden serious symptoms. Do not assume these are simply a panic attack. If you are uncertain whether a symptom may represent an emergency, seek prompt professional help.

07 Can recurrent panic attacks be treated?

Yes. Treatment may include psychological therapies such as cognitive behavioral therapy, medication, or a combination, depending on the clinical assessment. If attacks recur, cause substantial distress, lead to avoidance or disrupt daily activities, discuss treatment options with a qualified healthcare professional.