

Panic Disorder



The Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA) is a national 501 (c)3 nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote the prevention, treatment and cure of anxiety disorders and to improve the lives of all people who suffer from them. Help ADAA help others. Donate now at www.adaa.org.

For information visit www.adaa.org or contact

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“ My heart’s pounding,
it’s hard to breathe.
I feel like I’m going to
go crazy or die.
I have to get out
of here NOW. ”



About Anxiety Disorders

What is Panic Disorder?

We've all experienced that gut-wrenching fear when suddenly faced with a threatening or dangerous situation. Crossing the street as a car shoots out of nowhere, losing a child in the playground or hearing someone scream fire in a crowded theater. The momentary panic sends chills down our spines, causes our hearts to beat wildly, our stomachs to knot and our minds to fill with terror. When the danger passes, so do the symptoms. We're relieved that the dreaded terror didn't happen and we move on.

But now imagine standing in line in a grocery store talking with a neighbor when suddenly, *out of the blue*, you feel as if you're in the throws of an impending disaster. Your heart is pounding out of your chest, you feel tingly, sweaty and lightheaded. You are convinced you're going to pass out, lose your mind, make a fool of yourself, or, perhaps, even die. Then, as quickly as the feelings came on, they pass. You've had a panic attack. You're exhausted, confused and wondering, "What if it happens again?"

People who experience spontaneous, seemingly out-of-the-blue panic attacks *and* are preoccupied with the fear of it happening again have a serious, yet treatable condition called panic disorder. The attacks, which develop abruptly and reach a peak within a few minutes, occur unexpectedly, sometimes even while the person is asleep.

Panic disorder affects over 6 million American adults and typically develops in early adulthood. It is three times more common in women than in men.

What is Agoraphobia?

Some people with panic disorder begin avoiding places or situations where they previously had a panic attack, in anticipation of it happening again. Typically they avoid public places where immediate escape would be difficult, such as shopping malls, public transportation or large sports arenas. These people have agoraphobia. Their world may become smaller and smaller, as they are constantly on guard for the next attack. About one in three people with panic disorder develops agoraphobia. Some become "territory-bound," using a fixed route between home and work or always have a "safe person" accompany them places. Others are only comfortable venturing out by themselves. In extreme cases, people with agoraphobia may not leave the house, or do so only if absolutely necessary.

Anxiety is a normal part of living. It's the body's way of telling us something isn't right. It keeps us from harm's way and prepares us to act quickly in the face of danger. However, for some people, anxiety is persistent, irrational and overwhelming. It may get in the way of day-to-day activities and even make them impossible. This may be a sign of an anxiety disorder.

The term "anxiety disorders" describes a group of conditions including generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), **panic disorder**, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social anxiety disorder (SAD) and specific phobias. For information on all of the anxiety disorders visit www.adaa.org.

What's the difference between normal anxiety and panic disorder?

Normal Anxiety

Panicking because the school nurse called to tell you your child was injured on the playground.

Being scared and anxious about driving on the highway at night during a snowstorm.

Anxiously anticipating a job evaluation.

Panic Disorder

Sitting in the movie theater and suddenly, out of the blue, having a panic attack that makes you feel as if you were going to lose control of yourself and start screaming.

Being preoccupied with the fear of having a panic attack or passing out while driving for no apparent reason.

Relentless, irrational and overwhelming fear of experiencing the next panic attack, even though there is no apparent threat or danger.



“ I was so relieved when my doctor put a name to my problem. To discover that there are other people like me. To learn that there is hope.”



How can panic disorder affect your life?

From the terrifying and confusing symptoms of the attacks themselves to the constant fear of having another attack — panic disorder can be frightening, disruptive and debilitating. Since many of the symptoms mimic those found in illnesses like heart disease, thyroid problems and breathing disorders, people experiencing panic attacks often make multiple visits to emergency rooms or to doctors' offices, convinced they have a life-threatening illness. It often takes months or years and lots of frustration before getting a proper diagnosis. Some people are afraid or embarrassed to tell anyone, including their doctors or loved ones, about what they are experiencing for fear of being thought of as a hypochondriac. Instead, they suffer in silence, distancing themselves from friends, family and others who could be helpful.

Complicating the picture is the fact that panic disorder often co-occurs with other mental and physical disorders including other anxiety disorders, depression, irritable bowel syndrome, asthma and substance abuse. This may further increase the difficulty in getting a proper diagnosis and treatment.

What causes panic disorder?

While the exact cause of panic disorder is unknown, research suggests that a combination of a person's biology or genes, personality and environmental factors all contribute to the onset and development of panic disorder.

What treatments are available?

Fortunately, most individuals who seek treatment for panic disorder and other anxiety disorders see significant improvement and enjoy a better quality of life. A variety of treatment options exist including cognitive-behavioral therapy, exposure therapy, anxiety management and medications. One, or a combination of these, may be recommended. Details about these treatments are available on the ADAA website at www.adaa.org.

It is important to remember that there is no single “right” treatment. What works for one person may or may not be the best choice for someone else. A course of treatment should be tailored to your individual needs. Ask your doctor to explain why a particular type of treatment is being recommended, what other options are available and what you need to do to fully participate in your recovery.

How can ADAA help you?

Suffering from panic disorder or any anxiety disorder can interfere with many aspects of your life. ADAA can give you the resources that will help you and your loved ones better understand your condition, connect you with a community of people who know what you are experiencing and assist you in finding mental health professionals in your city who can help. Visit the ADAA website at www.adaa.org to locate doctors and therapists who treat panic disorder and other anxiety disorders in your area, as well as local support groups. Learn about the causes, symptoms and best treatments for all of the anxiety disorders, review questions to ask a therapist or doctor and find helpful books, tapes and other materials to help family and loved ones. ADAA is here to help you make the best decisions so that you can get on with your life.

Take Five & Manage Your Anxiety

You are not alone. Talk to someone – a friend, loved one or doctor. Get help. Anxiety disorders are real, serious and treatable.

Whether you have normal anxiety or an anxiety disorder, these strategies will help you cope:

Exercise.
Go for a walk or jog.
Do yoga.
Dance. Just get moving!

Talk to someone ... spouse, significant other, friend, child or doctor.

Keep a daily journal.
Become aware of what triggers your anxiety.

Eat a balanced diet. Don't skip meals. Avoid caffeine which can trigger anxiety symptoms.

Contact ADAQ at www.adaa.org.
Let us help you help yourself.

Panic Disorder Self-Test

If you think you might have panic disorder, take the test below. Answer "yes" or "no" to the questions and discuss the results with your doctor.

Yes or No? Are you troubled by:

- Y N Repeated, unexpected "attacks" during which you suddenly are overcome by intense fear or discomfort, for no apparent reason?

During this attack, did you experience any of these symptoms?

- Y N pounding heart
 Y N sweating
 Y N trembling/shaking
 Y N shortness of breath
 Y N choking
 Y N chest pain
 Y N "jelly" legs
 Y N dizziness
 Y N fear of dying
 Y N chills or hot flushes
 Y N nausea or abdominal discomfort
 Y N feelings of unreality or being detached from yourself
 Y N fear of losing control, going crazy
 Y N numbness/tingling sensations

Are you troubled by:

- Y N Fear of places or situations where getting help or escape might be difficult?
 Y N Being unable to travel without a companion?

For at least one month after an attack, have you:

- Y N Felt persistent concern about having another one?
 Y N Worried about having a heart attack or going "crazy?"
 Y N Changed your behavior to accommodate the attack?

Having more than one illness at the same time can make it difficult to diagnose and treat the different conditions. Conditions that sometimes complicate anxiety disorders include depression and substance abuse, among others.

Yes or No? In the last year, have you experienced:

- Y N Changes in sleeping or eating habits?
 Y N Feeling sad or depressed more days than not?
 Y N A disinterest in life more days than not?
 Y N A feeling of worthlessness or guilt more days than not?
 Y N An inability to fulfill responsibilities at work/school or family due to alcohol or drug use?
 Y N A dangerous situation, such as driving under the influence, caused by alcohol or drug use?
 Y N Being arrested due to alcohol or drugs?
 Y N The need to continue using alcohol or drugs despite it causing problems for you and/or your loved ones?