

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?

Everyone has experienced that gut-wrenching fear when faced with a suddenly dangerous situation: crossing the street as a car shoots out of nowhere, losing track of a child on the playground, or hearing a high-pitched scream nearby. The momentary panic causes our hearts to beat wildly, our stomachs to knot, and our minds to fill with terror. When the threat or danger passes, so does the fear.

But people who have panic disorder experience this type of fear for no apparent reason. The panic attacks, also known as anxiety attacks, occur unexpectedly, sometimes even during sleep. The abrupt onset of intense fear reaches a peak within a few minutes, and it feels as if there's an impending disaster. Your heart is pounding out of your chest, and you feel sweaty and lightheaded. You're sure you will pass out, lose your mind, or even die. Then just as quickly, the symptoms disappear, but you become preoccupied with the fear of another attack.

Many people don't know that this disorder is highly responsive to treatment. Some are afraid or embarrassed to tell anyone, including their doctors and loved ones, about what they experience for fear of being considered a hypochondriac. Instead they suffer in silence, distancing themselves from friends, family, and others who could be helpful or supportive.

Panic disorder affects over 6 million American adults and typically develops in early adulthood. It is twice as common in women as in men.

What is agoraphobia?

About one in three people with panic disorder develops agoraphobia. They begin avoiding places or situations where they previously experienced a panic attack. Typically they stay away from shopping malls, public transportation, large sports arenas, or other public places where immediate escape would be difficult. Their world becomes smaller as they constantly anticipate the next panic attack.

Some people become territory-bound, using a fixed route between home and work. Or they always have a "safe" person accompany them places. Others are comfortable only venturing out by themselves. In extreme cases, people with agoraphobia leave the safety of home only if absolutely necessary — or sometimes not at all.

Anxiety is normal. It helps us get out of harm's way and prepare for important events, and it warns us when we need to take action. But if you have anxiety that is persistent, irrational, and overwhelming and interferes with daily activities, you may have an anxiety disorder.

The term "anxiety disorders" refers to generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social anxiety disorder, and specific phobias.

For more information, visit www.adaa.org.

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

Normal Anxiety

Panicking because the school nurse calls to say your child has been injured on the playground

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

Anxiously anticipating a performance evaluation at work

Panic Disorder

Enjoying a movie in the theater and suddenly feeling as if you're going to lose control or "go crazy"

Giving up driving because you're preoccupied with with the fear of having a panic attack or passing out in the car for no apparent reason

Relentless, irrational, and overwhelming fear of experiencing the next panic attack, without any evident 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 panic attacks to the constant fear of having another one, panic disorder can be frightening, disruptive, and debilitating. Since many of the symptoms mimic those of heart disease, thyroid problems, and breathing disorders, people who have panic attacks often visit the emergency room or doctors' offices, convinced they have a life-threatening illness. It often takes months or years and a great deal of frustration before receiving the correct diagnosis.

Complicating the picture is the fact that panic disorder often 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?

Research suggests that a combination of biology, personality, and environmental factors all contribute to the onset and development of this disorder.

What treatments are available?

Most people who seek treatment for panic disorder and other anxiety disorders see significant improvement and enjoy a better quality of life. Although treatment is individualized, a variety of treatment options exists, including cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), exposure therapy, anxiety management, and medications. One or a combination of these may be recommended.

Learn more about treatment at www.adaa.org.

There is no single best treatment. What works for one person 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 or any anxiety disorder can interfere with many aspects of your life. ADAA can provide 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 who can help.

Visit ADAA at www.adaa.org to locate doctors and therapists who treat panic and other anxiety disorders, as well as local support groups. Learn about the causes, symptoms, and treatments for anxiety disorders; review questions to ask a therapist or doctor; and find helpful 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:

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

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

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

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

5 Contact ADAA at www.adaa.org. Let us help you help yourself.

Panic Disorder Self-Test

If you suspect you might suffer from panic disorder, answer the questions below and share them with your health care professional.

Are you troubled by the following?

- Y N Repeated, unexpected "attacks;" feeling suddenly overcome by intense fear or discomfort for no apparent reason

If yes, did you experience any of these symptoms?

- Y N pounding heart
 Y N sweating
 Y N trembling or 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 fear of losing control or "going crazy"
 Y N numbness or tingling sensations

As a result of these attacks, have you...

- Y N experienced a fear of places or situations where getting help or escape might be difficult, such as in a crowd or on a bridge?
 Y N felt 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. Depression and substance abuse are among the conditions that occasionally complicate panic disorder.

- Y N Have you experienced changes in sleeping or eating habits?

More days than not, do you feel...

- Y N sad or depressed?
 Y N disinterested in life?
 Y N worthless or guilty?

During the last year, has the use of alcohol or drugs...

- Y N resulted in your failure to fulfill responsibilities with work, school, or family?
 Y N placed you in a dangerous situation, such as driving a car under the influence?
 Y N gotten you arrested?
 Y N continued despite causing problems for you or your loved ones?