

Panic Attacks/Disorder

What is Panic Disorder?

A disorder in which an individual has repeated panic attacks or feels continuous severe anxiety about having another attack. The disorder is strikingly different from other types of anxiety in that panic attacks are so sudden, appear to be unprovoked, and are often disabling. Panic disorder is a serious health problem in this county, with at least 1.6% of adult Americans diagnosed with panic disorder at some point in their lives.

What are the Symptoms of a Panic Attack?

The symptoms of a panic attack appear suddenly without any apparent cause and can last for several minutes.

- Racing or pounding heartbeat
- Chest pains
- Dizziness, lightheadedness, nausea
- Difficulty breathing
- Tingling or numbness in the hands
- Flashes or chills
- Dreamlike sensations or perceptual distortions
- Terror--a sense that something unimaginably horrible is about to occur and one is powerless to prevent it
- Fear of losing control and doing something embarrassing
- Fear of dying

What Causes Panic Disorder?

According to one theory of panic disorder, the body's normal "alarm system"--the set of mental and physical mechanisms that allows a person to respond to a threat--tends to be triggered unnecessarily, when there is no danger. Scientists don't know exactly why this happens, or why some people are more susceptible to the problem than others.

Is Panic Disorder Serious?

Yes. Panic disorder is real and potentially disabling but it can be controlled with specific treatments.

What is the Treatment for Panic Disorder?

There are a variety of treatments available, including several effective medications and also specific forms of counseling. Often, a combination of counseling and medications produces good results. Improvement is usually noticed in a fairly short period of time--about 6 to 8 weeks. In addition, people with panic disorder may need treatment for other emotional problems. Depression has often been associated with panic disorder, as have alcohol and drug abuse.

What Happens if Panic Disorder is Not Treated?

If left untreated it may worsen to the point where the person's life is seriously affected by panic attacks and by attempts to avoid or conceal them.

For information and help on campus, see [Counseling and Psychological Services](#) [1]. Or for more information on panic disorders visit the [National Institute of Mental Health's website](#) [2].

Source URL: <https://caps.unc.edu/self-help/stress-and-anxiety/panic-attacksdisorder>

Links

[1] <https://caps.unc.edu/node/19>

[2] <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/panic-disorder/index.shtml>