

A Panic Attack

If you have an occasional panic attack, no treatment other than explanation and reassurance is usually needed. If you have recurring panic attacks, see your doctor as treatment can often help.

What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is a severe attack of anxiety and fear which occurs suddenly, often without warning, and for no apparent reason. Various other symptoms then occur during a panic attack. These include one or more of the following:

- Palpitations or a thumping heart.
- Sweating and trembling.
- Hot flushes or chills.
- Feeling short of breath, sometimes with choking sensations.
- Chest pains.
- Feeling sick.
- Feeling dizzy, or faint.
- Fear of dying or going crazy.
- Numbness, or pins and needles.
- Feelings of unreality, or being detached from yourself.

The physical symptoms that occur with panic attacks do not mean there is a physical problem with the heart, chest, etc. The symptoms mainly occur because of an 'overdrive' of nervous impulses from the brain to various parts of the body during a panic attack.

During a panic attack you tend to over-breathe (hyperventilate). If you over-breathe you 'blow out' too much carbon dioxide which changes the acidity in the blood. This can then cause more symptoms such as confusion and cramps, and make palpitations, dizziness, and pins and needles worse. This can make the attack seem even more frightening, and make you over-breathe even more, and so on.

A panic attack usually lasts 5-10 minutes, but sometimes they come in 'waves' for up to two hours.

Who gets panic attacks?

At least 1 in 10 people have occasional panic attacks. They tend to occur most in young adults. Twice as many women than men have panic attacks. Anyone can have a panic attack, but they also tend to run in some families.

What causes panic attacks?

Panic attacks usually occur for no apparent reason. The cause is not clear. Stressful life events such as a bereavement may sometimes trigger a panic attack.

Dealing with a panic attack

To ease a panic attack, or to prevent one from getting worse:

- breathe as slowly and as deeply as you can. Concentrate on breathing.
- breathe into a paper bag. By doing this you re-breathe your own carbon dioxide. This helps to correct the blood acid level that had been upset by over-breathing which makes symptoms worse (described above).

What is the treatment for a panic attack?

No regular treatment is needed if you have just an occasional panic attack. You may find it helpful to:

- understand about panic attacks, and the cause of the symptoms.
- know that any physical symptoms which occur do not mean that you have a serious disease. For example, some people find it helpful to know that the palpitations or chest pains they had during a panic attack were not due to a heart or chest problem.
- know how to deal with a panic attack (see above).

If you have frequent or recurring panic attacks, this is called panic disorder. Treatment to prevent panic attacks is an option if you develop panic disorder. See a separate leaflet called '*Panic Disorder*'.

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