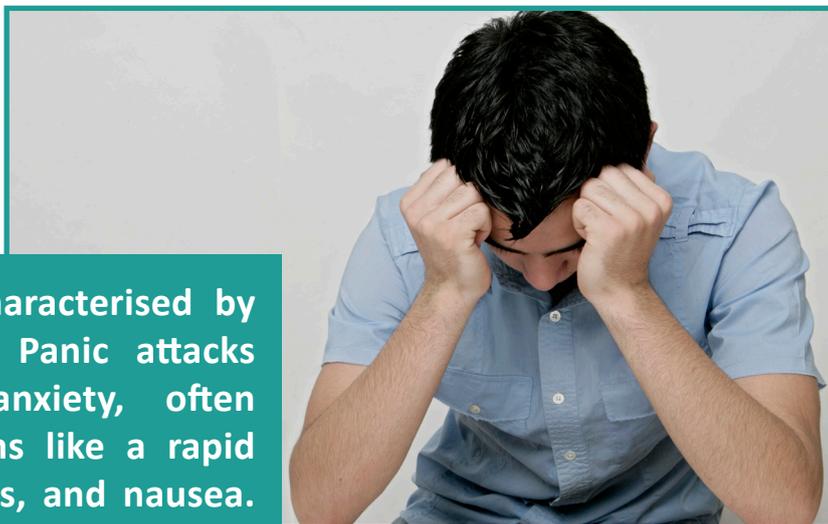


# Panic disorder



Panic disorder is the condition characterised by the occurrence of panic attacks. Panic attacks are unpredictable attacks of anxiety, often accompanied by physical symptoms like a rapid heart rate, sweating, breathlessness, and nausea.

## What is it?

Panic disorder is the condition characterised by the occurrence of panic attacks, which are unpredictable attacks of anxiety, often accompanied by physical symptoms. The attacks are not triggered by specific events or situations (unlike phobias). Panic disorder affects approximately 3-5 per cent of people.

## Causes

The exact cause of panic disorder is not known, although stimulants, such as caffeine and cocaine may induce the symptoms. Alcohol can trigger these symptoms in some people. People with a family history of panic attacks are more at risk, and panic attack affects women more than men.

## Diagnosis

Panic attacks usually begin suddenly and last from 10-30 minutes. This however, is quite variable. The key features are anxiety, fear and apprehension. Physical symptoms include:

- Rapid heart rate.
- Breathlessness and rapid breathing (hyperventilation).
- Sweating.
- Nausea.
- Dizziness.

The diagnosis is confirmed when doctors have excluded other causes for these symptoms (e.g. heart disease, thyroid disease). In most cases, the diagnosis is fairly clear from the description of the symptoms.

## Treatment

Treatment for panic attacks and panic disorder is very effective, with most people able to lead normal lives. Alcohol and caffeine are known to trigger attacks and should be avoided.

## Medications

- Antidepressants like citalopram and escitalopram are commonly used and are very effective in preventing attacks.
- Anti-anxiety medications like bupropion may be used if the person suffers exclusively from anxiety (with no depression).
- Sedatives and tranquillisers, like diazepam may be used to relieve symptoms but this is usually only a short-term treatment (dependency is a problem with longer-term usage).

Psychotherapy is often helpful. Various techniques are used but 'Cognitive Behaviour Therapy' (a technique where the therapist helps the person to understand the condition and to cope with it) is among the more effective.

Most people do best with a combination of medication and psychotherapy.

## Lifestyle changes

Panic attacks often occur in people who are very anxious. Lifestyle changes like regular exercise, getting enough sleep, eating a healthy balanced diet and avoiding alcohol, caffeine and nicotine can reduce your anxiety levels.