

Patient information from BMJ

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Panic attacks: what are they?

If you've ever had a panic attack you'll know how frightening it is. But, no matter how alarming your feelings are, it's important to know that nothing will happen to you. The feelings usually fade away after a few minutes.

Some people never have a second panic attack, while others find that they happen again. If this happens to you there are treatments that can help you cope.

What happens during a panic attack?

If you have a panic attack you suddenly feel terrified, possibly for no reason. Along with other symptoms, such as a pounding heart, you might even feel as though the world is going to end or that you're going to die.

Doctors aren't certain why some people get panic attacks. People who get panic attacks tend to start getting them in their late teens or early 20s. Women get them more often than men.

If the fear of having a panic attack is stopping you from living life normally you may have what doctors call panic disorder.

Doctors diagnose panic disorder if someone has been having panic attacks, and worrying about having more attacks, for at least one month.

What are the symptoms?

Panic attacks can happen unexpectedly, or when you feel anxious about a situation. Your doctor might say you have had a panic attack if you have had at least four of these symptoms:

- A racing, pounding, or skipping heart beat
- Sweating
- Shortness of breath or a smothering feeling
- A feeling of choking
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Nausea or discomfort in your stomach
- Feeling dizzy, light headed, unsteady, or faint

Panic attacks: what are they?

- Feeling detached from yourself
- Fear of losing control or going crazy
- Numbness or tingling feelings
- Chills or hot flushes
- Trembling or shaking.

What will happen to me?

It's hard to say exactly what will happen to you. Different people experience panic disorder in different ways. And a treatment that helps you may not help someone else.

Many people who get panic attacks find that their symptoms come and go. About half of people who have treatment don't get panic attacks again, but some people still get some symptoms. For a few people, treatment doesn't seem to help.

If you have agoraphobia (an extreme fear of certain situations or places), anxiety, or depression as well as panic disorder, it may be harder for you to make a good recovery.

But if you have panic disorder without one of these other conditions your chances of recovering completely are very good.

For more information on treatments for panic attacks see our leaflet *Panic attacks: what treatments work?*

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