

# What are Panic Attacks?

Panic attacks are brief periods of overwhelming fear or anxiety. The intensity of a panic attack goes well beyond normal anxiety and can include a number of physical symptoms. During panic attacks, people often fear that they are having a heart attack, they cannot breathe, or they are dying.

Panic attacks may feel scary, but they don't actually cause physical harm. The most common fears associated with panic attacks (having a heart attack or fainting) are not actually a threat.

Panic attacks are usually brief but intense. The symptoms of panic typically peak within 10 minutes, and end within 30 minutes. However, some lingering symptoms can last over an hour.

Panic attacks can seem to occur randomly, or they can be closely linked to a specific source of anxiety such as driving, crowded places, or simply leaving home.

Panic disorder occurs when a person has frequent worry or fear of future panic attacks, or when they change their behavior to avoid attacks (such as avoiding a feared situation).

## Treatments for Panic Attacks

- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can be used to treat panic attacks and panic disorders. CBT works by identifying and changing unhealthy thinking patterns that trigger panic attacks.
- Exposure-based therapies for panic attacks focus on confronting the triggers of the panic attacks in order to disconnect them with feelings of distress. This treatment involves repeated exposure to the triggers in a gradual and safe manner until the panic attacks diminish.
- Medication may be used to treat and manage symptoms of panic disorder, but should be accompanied by another form of treatment such as psychotherapy.
- Much like how muscles become stronger with exercise, the body's relaxation response can be improved with practice. Frequent use of relaxation techniques like deep breathing, meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation can help to combat panic attacks.

## Signs and Symptoms of Panic Attacks

Victims of trauma who are suffering from a panic attack may experience:



**Pounding or racing heart.**



**Sweating.**



**Trembling or shaking.**



**Fear of "going crazy."**



**Feeling of being detached from reality.**



**Breathing difficulties.**



**Sense of choking.**



**Chest pain or discomfort.**



**Nausea.**



**Fear of dying.**

