



## BASIC INFORMATION

### DESCRIPTION

A severe, spontaneous form of anxiety that is recurrent and unpredictable. Most attacks last 2 to 10 minutes, but some may extend over an hour or two. This type of anxiety occurs with attack-like symptoms (often during sleep), while chronic anxiety (generalized anxiety) is a persistent state of anxiety.

### FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

#### Physical symptoms:

- Palpitations; rapid heartbeat; chest pains.
- Shortness of breath; choking feeling; hyperventilation; weakness or faintness; fainting (occasionally); sweating and trembling.
- Numbness and tingling around the mouth, hands and feet.
- Muscle spasms or contractions in the hands and feet.
- Feeling of "butterflies" in the stomach.

#### Emotional symptoms:

- Intense fear of losing one's mind (fear of going crazy); fear of dying; sense of terror, doom or dread.
- Sense of unreality, loss of contact with people and objects.

### CAUSES

- The brain's "alarm system" appears to be influenced by a complex interaction of biologic factors, genetics, illnesses, drugs and one's own personal history of traumatic events.
- A variety of disorders can simulate panic attacks (heart rhythm problems, angina, respiratory illness, asthma, obstructive pulmonary disease, endocrine disorders, seizure disorders, stimulating drugs, withdrawal from certain drugs).

### RISK INCREASES WITH

- Stress; feelings of guilt, fatigue or overwork; illness; alcohol or drug abuse.
- History of other psychiatric problems; family history of panic disorder.

### PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- There are no specific measures to prevent a first panic attack; therapy helps prevent additional episodes.

### EXPECTED OUTCOME

- For many, this disorder may run a limited course with a few attacks and long periods of remission. For others, treatment with psychotherapy and/or medication is effective.

### POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Chronic anxiety or depression.
- Phobias, including agoraphobia, a fear of being alone or being in public places.
- Drug dependency.



## TREATMENT

### GENERAL MEASURES

- Medical history and exam by a doctor.
- Laboratory tests as needed to rule out other disorders.
- Talk to a friend or family member about your feelings. This sometimes defuses your anxiety.
- Keep a journal or diary about your anxious thoughts or emotions. Consider the causes and possible solutions.
- Join a self-help group. Call your local mental health society for referrals.
- Learn relaxation techniques. For some people, meditation is effective.
- Reduce stress in your life where possible.
- For hyperventilation symptoms, cover the mouth and nose with a small paper bag and breathe into it for a few minutes.

### MEDICATION

Your doctor may prescribe an antidepressant, benzodiazepine or beta-blocking agent. The medicine may be slowly reduced or discontinued after 6 months to a year to determine if the panic attacks will return. If they do not return, the medicine can be discontinued.

### ACTIVITY

- Get physical exercise regularly.
- Get adequate rest at night.

### DIET

Consider giving up caffeine (coffee, tea, soft drinks). You may experience withdrawal symptoms of headache or tiredness, but they will stop in a few days.



## NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF

- You or a family member has symptoms of panic disorder that don't diminish with self-treatment.
- Treatment program fails after 8 weeks.
- New, unexplained symptoms develop.