

# Panic attacks

A panic attack is a sudden episode of intense fear or anxiety that usually triggers severe physical symptoms. Panic attacks can occur frequently, unexpectedly and sometimes without an obvious cause or trigger.

You may experience warning signs before an attack, including an elevated heartbeat, difficulty breathing or a sudden feeling of fear or dread. There is no way to completely prevent a panic attack once it starts, but there are strategies you can use to stop them worsening or becoming more frequent.



## What causes panic attacks?

It's often unclear what causes panic attacks. Why a person may experience an attack will differ depending on their situation, life events and the individual themselves.

Panic attacks may be influenced by:

- Chronic stress or a major life stressor, such as the loss of a loved one or a serious illness.
- The experience of trauma and traumatic events.
- External stressors, such as phobias.
- Genetics.
- If a person has an existing mental health condition, such as depression, anxiety or PTSD, they may be more likely to experience panic attacks.

## Panic attacks and panic disorders

A person might experience one or two **panic attacks** in their life which cease when the stressor is removed. When panic attacks are recurrent and a person becomes immensely fearful of the next attack, it can develop into a **panic disorder**.

**Panic attacks are common, and around 5% of the population will experience a panic attack at some point in their life. Around 1.5%-4% of people will experience a panic disorder.**

## The signs and symptoms

Panic attacks usually cause a range of severe psychological and physical symptoms. Most attacks reach their peak within 10 minutes and rarely last for longer than an hour. The signs and symptoms of panic attacks will vary from person to person.

### Physical:

- Pain in chest
- Difficulty breathing
- Pounding heart
- Tingling or chills
- Feeling dizzy or faint

### Psychological:

- Sense of terror
- Thoughts of losing control
- Fear of going mad or dying
- Sense of unreality or detachment
- Heightened vigilance for danger

# STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING PANIC ATTACKS

1

## **Psychological treatments.**

CBT, or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, is considered one of the most effective methods for managing panic attacks and panic disorders. Other treatment options include psychoeducation and exposure therapy.

2

## **Physical/medical treatments.**

Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitor (SSRI) antidepressants are one of the most common form of medications prescribed to people experiencing panic attacks. Speak with a doctor about the options.

3

## **Biofeedback therapy.**

Biofeedback therapy gives a person the chance to observe their physiological responses to stress and anxiety through non-invasive sensors or monitors. It can help a person learn how to control these responses.

4

## **Stress management techniques.**

Stress management strategies will differ from person to person. They may include establishing a routine, writing down thoughts or feelings that feel challenging or exercising regularly.

5

## **Breathing and relaxation techniques.**

Slow, deep breathing can help a person calm down if they are experiencing a panic attack. Breathing retraining may be incorporated into therapy.