

What You Should Know About PANIC DISORDER

"All of a sudden, I felt a tremendous wave of fear for no reason at all. My heart was pounding, my chest hurt, and it was getting harder to breathe. I thought I was going to die."

"I'm so afraid. Every time I start to go out, I get that awful feeling in the pit of my stomach and I'm terrified that another panic attack is coming."

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF A PANIC ATTACK?

As described above, the symptoms of a panic attack appear suddenly, without apparent cause. They may include:

- * Racing or pounding heartbeat
- * Chest pains
- * Dizziness, light-headedness, nausea
- * Difficulty breathing
- * Tingling or numbness in the hands
- * Flushes or chills
- * Dreamlike sensations or perceptual distortions
- * Terror - a sense that something unimaginably horrible is about to occur and one is powerless to prevent it
- * Fear of losing control and doing something embarrassing
- * Fear of dying

A panic attack typically lasts for several minutes and is one of the most distressing conditions that a person can experience. Most who have one attack will have others. When someone has repeated attacks, or feels severe anxiety about having another attack, he or she is said to have panic disorder.

WHAT IS PANIC DISORDER?

Panic disorder is strikingly different from other types of anxiety in that panic attacks are sudden, appear to be unprovoked, and are often disabling.

Once someone has had a panic attack - for example, while driving, shopping in a crowded store, or riding in an elevator - he or she may develop irrational fears, called phobias, about these situations and begin to avoid them. Eventually the pattern of avoidance and level of anxiety about another attack may reach the point where the individual with panic disorder may be unable to drive or even step out of the house. At this stage, the person is said to have panic disorder with agoraphobia. Thus panic disorder can have as serious an impact on a person's daily life as other major illnesses - unless the individual receives effective treatment. A serious health problem in this country, at least 1.6 percent of adult Americans, or about 5 million people will have panic disorder at some time in their lives.

WHAT CAUSES PANIC DISORDER?

According to one theory, the body's normal "alarm system" tends to be triggered unnecessarily. Scientists don't know exactly why this happens. Panic disorder has been found to run in families, and this may mean that inheritance (genes) play a strong role in determining who will get it. Often first attacks are triggered by physical illness, a major life stress, extended stress over a period of many years or certain medications.

IS PANIC DISORDER SERIOUS?

Yes, panic disorder is real and potentially disabling, but it can be controlled with specific treatments. Because of the disturbing symptoms that accompany panic disorder, it may be mistaken for heart disease or some other life-threatening medical illness. People frequently go to a hospital emergency room when they are having a panic attack, and extensive medical tests may be performed to rule out these other conditions.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR PANIC DISORDER?

Thanks to research, there are a variety of treatments available, including several effective medications, and also specific forms of psychotherapy. Often, a combination of psychotherapy and medications produces good results. Some improvement may be noticed in a fairly short period of time - about six to eight weeks. It is rarely necessary to hospitalize someone with the disorder. Thus, appropriate treatment of panic disorder can prevent subsequent panic attacks or at least substantially reduce their severity and frequency, bringing significant relief to seventy to ninety percent of people with panic disorder.

In addition, people with panic disorder may need treatment for other mental problems. Depression has often been associated with panic disorder, as has substance abuse. Recent research also suggests that suicide attempts are more frequent in people with panic disorder.