

# Panic Attacks and Panic Disorders



### Panic Attacks and Panic Disorders

#### Introduction

Panic attacks are severe states of fear triggered by no real danger at the time. When panic attacks occur, they are combined with an intense feeling of losing control, the victim usually mistaking the frightening experience for a heart attack or death.

In cases of recurring panic attacks, over a long period of time, followed by an intense fear of having another panic attack, these symptoms qualify for a medical condition called panic disorder. Most people don't have more than two panic attacks in their lifetime. In the past, it was considered as a simple condition of stress, but now is recognized as a legitimate medical condition.

#### Overview and Facts

According to studies done by IDRAAC, the lifetime prevalence of panic disorder is 0.5% so 1 in 200 Lebanese has the disorder. It is also known that women are more likely to develop this disorder.

#### Symptoms

Panic attacks strike without warning and at any time. They may occur during activities such as driving and can endanger the life of everyone aboard.

Panic attacks manifest with the following symptoms:

- Sense of impending doom or danger
- Fear of loss of control or death
- Rapid heart rate
- Sweating
- Trembling
- Shortness of breath
- Hyperventilation
- Chills
- Hot flashes
- Nausea
- Abdominal cramping
- Chest pain
- Headache
- Dizziness
- Faintness
- Tightness in your throat
- Trouble swallowing

The worst thing about this disorder is the constant fear of having another panic attack which may escalate into a disorder called Agoraphobia, which is the fear of leaving one's house, due to the constant feeling of danger.

### Causes and Risk Factors

Although it is unknown what exactly causes the panic attacks to occur, these events are likely to increase a risk of being victim to panic attacks or in severe cases panic attack disorder:

- Genetics
- Major stress
- Certain changes in the way parts of your brain function
- Stress susceptible temperament
- History of family or childhood abuse
- Experiencing a traumatic event in during childhood years

As a general rule, panic attacks tend of affect more woman than man.

Complications likely to occur in relation to panic attacks/panic attack disorder are the following:

- Development of specific phobias, such as fear of driving or leaving your home
- Avoidance of social situations
- Problems at work or school
- Depression
- Increased risk of suicide or suicidal thoughts
- Alcohol or substance abuse

### Tests and Diagnosis

To diagnose panic attacks and panic disorder, a person should consult a mental health professional who will rely on scientific criteria to check whether he/she has that disorder. For the sake of placing an accurate diagnosis, the patient will be subjected to:

- Physical evaluation
- Blood tests to check the thyroids and other possible conditions and test of the heart, such as EKG and ECG
- An evaluation by a doctor or mental health professional in order to assess the stressful situations, symptoms the patient has been dealing with

### Treatment

When treating panic attacks and panic attack disorders professionals usually resort to both psychotherapy and medications.

#### • Psychotherapy:

In a safe setting the psychotherapist might help the patient recreate the panic attack in a safe setting, in order to portray them as not harmful or dangerous to the patient which will likely reduce the fear of having another attack.

This specific approach is called Cognitive Behavioral therapy.

#### • Medications:

In order to treat panic attack related disorder the mental health expert or doctor is likely to assign to the patient antidepressants or mild sedatives such as Benzodiazepines, a certain doze of Serotonin norepinephrine uptake inhibitors and so on.

### Sources

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