

# Panic Disorder Fact Sheet

## What is Panic Disorder?

An anxiety disorder characterized by unexpected and repeated episodes of intense fear accompanied by physical symptoms that may include chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, or abdominal distress. The diagnosis of panic disorder is often not made until medical procedures have ruled out a physical ailment, as these sensations often mimic symptoms of a heart attack or other life threatening medical conditions.

Many people with panic disorder develop intense anxiety between episodes. It is not unusual for a person with panic disorder to develop phobias (fears) about places or situations where panic attacks have occurred, such as in supermarkets or other everyday situations. As the frequency of panic attacks increases, the person often begins to avoid situations where they fear another attack may occur or where help would not be immediately available. This avoidance may eventually develop into agoraphobia, an inability to go beyond known and safe surroundings, because of intense fear and anxiety.

- Approximately 2.4 million American adults ages 18 to 54 (about 1.7% of people in this age group) in a given year, have panic disorder
- Panic disorder typically develops in late adolescence or early adulthood
- Panic disorder is twice as common in women as in men
- Attacks can occur at any time, even waking one from sleep
- Panic disorder may coexist with other disorders, most often depression and substance abuse
- Not everyone who experiences a panic attack will develop panic disorder

## What are the symptoms of Panic Disorder?

- Panic attacks with at least four of the following physical symptoms:
  - Sweating
  - Hot or cold flashes
  - Racing heart
  - Trembling
  - Numbness
  - Feelings of dying, losing control, or losing one's mind
  - Faintness
  - Choking or smothering sensations
  - Labored breathing
  - Disorientation or a sense of unreality
  - Nausea
  - Chest pains
- Anxiety regarding having another panic attack
- Often avoidance of objects, people, activities, or places that are associated with panic attacks

## What Causes Panic Disorder?

- The exact cause of Panic Disorder is unknown
- Genetics may be one contributor
- It's possible that abnormalities in the autonomic nervous system also contribute

## Treatment of Panic Disorder

Panic Disorder can be treated with both medication and psychotherapy. Treatment for Panic Disorder typically includes learning mindfulness and relaxation skills, learning about the cycle of panic and gradually exposing the person to both physiological sensations and situations that are associated with panic at different levels of intensity.