



PANIC DISORDER

WHAT IS PANIC DISORDER?

Panic disorder is an anxiety disorder in which the key symptom is the experience of recurrent, unexpected panic attacks. These panic attacks are usually followed by at least one month of persistent worries of either having additional panic episodes, or the consequences of these episodes happening.

A panic attack is a sudden surge of anxiety that seems to come from nowhere. Very often, there is no specific trigger or warning. It can last for several minutes to half an hour. In between attacks, the person appears relatively well until the next attack.

In severe cases some patients may experience several attacks in a day. There may be so much fear of experiencing the next attack that you may decide to avoid going out to places from where escape may be difficult (eg. MRT stations, trains, or buses), and where help may not be readily available.

These are symptoms typical of agoraphobia. Panic disorders could also be complicated by social phobia, depression and substance abuse. Some patients with panic disorders even entertain thoughts of suicide.

SYMPTOMS

Symptoms of a panic attack include:

- Palpitations
- Sweating
- Trembling
- Difficulty in breathing
- Feeling of choking
- Chest discomfort or pain
- Nausea or abdominal distress
- Numbness or tingling sensations
- Chills or hot flashes
- Feeling dizzy or faint
- Feeling unreal or disconnected
- Fear of losing control/going crazy/ dying

TREATMENT

The main treatment options available are medications, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), or both. Antidepressant medications are effective in preventing panic attacks, even in the absence of depression.

CBT is also particularly effective. It helps you to identify your negative thoughts and teaches you how to challenge these irrational thoughts. You will learn techniques to control your anxiety symptoms, thereby preventing the development of a panic attack.

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As you begin to realise that your physical symptoms are anxiety-related and not the result of some serious physical condition and that you can exert some control over them, these attacks should become less severe and less frequent.

You should discuss with your mental health specialist about which treatment may be best for you.