

## **Panic Disorder**

### **Key Points**

- approximately 33 out of every 100 adults will experience a full panic attack in any given year
- the onset of panic disorder can occur at any age including childhood
- the rate of panic disorder is higher among women than men
- approximately 50 to 60% of individuals with panic disorder have problems with depression
- the average age of onset for panic disorders is 25 and three-quarters of the sufferers had been affected by age 33

### **What are Panic Attacks?**

Panic attacks are a common feature of all types of anxiety. A panic attack is a sudden rush of intense fear that is accompanied by physical sensations that can include heart palpitations, dizziness, sweating, and nausea. Anxiety disorders include panic disorder with and without agoraphobia (recurrent, unexpected panic attacks accompanied by fear of future attacks and may involve avoiding places or situations associated with the attacks). In 2002, just under 1 million people 15 or older reported having suffered from panic attacks at some point during their lifetime, according to Statscan in its Canadian Community Health Survey results.

### **What is the Difference between Panic Attacks and Panic Disorder?**

It is important to point out the differences between a panic attack and panic disorder. A panic attack is a sudden rush of intense fear or discomfort that is accompanied by at least 4 symptoms of anxiety (e.g. rapid heartbeat or palpitations, sweating, feeling faint or dizzy, trembling, choking sensations, hot flushes, cold chills, difficulty breathing, nausea, unreality, fear of dying, fear of losing control, fear of going crazy, etc.).

A panic episode with less than four of these symptoms is referred to by mental health professionals as a "limited symptom attack". These symptoms are all normal signs of the alarm reaction or "fight-flight" response that all human beings will experience when they feel a sense of fear or danger. The onset of a panic attack is usually very rapid (i.e. typically within 5-10 minutes) and on average they last for 5 to 10 minutes at peak intensity.

However, having a panic attack does not mean one has panic disorder. Most panic attacks experienced by people are simply strong anxiety reactions to anticipating something (e.g. job interview, death of a dying loved one, medical procedures, etc.), experiencing a stressful event (e.g. work deadline, relationship difficulties, health problems, etc.) or experiencing an event that causes physical symptoms (e.g. rushing to catch a bus,

strenuous exercise, feeling overheated, consuming caffeine or recreational drugs, etc.). Most people are able to recognize a panic attack as a sign of high stress or anxiety and can let the experience come and go without any adverse impact upon their life.

## **How Do Panic Attacks Affect Daily Life?**

For people suffering from panic disorder it is the panic attacks themselves that create distress and interfere in their lives. The panic attacks in panic disorder are "false alarms" as they occur when there is no real danger, they are not the result of a medical condition such as a heart murmur and they do not reflect alcohol or drug intoxication. Mental health professionals refer to this pattern of symptoms as panic disorder and it is estimated that approximately 3 to 4 out of every 100 people will have panic disorder at some point in their lives. In its study on data from the 2002 Canadian Community Health Survey, Statscan found panic disorders affects about 3.7% of the Canadian population.

For people with panic disorder it may become very difficult to forget about past panic attacks. The person with panic disorder may become extremely fearful about having another panic attack or experiencing negative consequences in their life as a result of their panic attacks (e.g. being humiliated at work or when socializing with friends or family). Common fears during a panic attack among people with panic disorder include fear of dying or being seriously ill (e.g. heart attack, stroke, brain tumor), fear of losing one's mind or "going crazy", fear of embarrassment and fear of losing control. In some cultures a panic attack can be associated with fear of witchcraft or magic. Panic disorder is like having a phobia of physical sensations (e.g. "my heart is pounding very fast and this must mean I am about to die of a heart attack" or "I feel dizzy and detached from reality so I must be about to pass out or lose my mind"). Individuals with panic disorder seem to be more sensitive to anxiety than people without panic disorder. Individuals high in anxiety sensitivity tend to view panic or anxiety symptoms as harmful and this trait may make people more vulnerable to developing a panic disorder.

In panic disorder the panic attacks occur repeatedly and initially unexpectedly. During a panic attack most people with panic disorder feel a very strong urge to escape the situation in which the panic attack occurs or they attempt to find a place or person that makes them feel safe. Over time some people with panic disorder come to associate the panic attacks with certain situations or experiences that they try to avoid to prevent more attacks. For example it is very common for people with panic disorder to avoid consuming coffee or alcohol, as their fear of the physical sensations associated with these substances can trigger a panic episode.

Many people with panic disorder also have agoraphobia (they avoid or suffer great distress in situations in which escape would be difficult or help unavailable if they were to have panic or anxiety symptoms). For this reason, mental health professionals distinguish between panic disorder *with agoraphobia* and panic disorder *without agoraphobia* (see the section on [agoraphobia](#) for more detailed information). Due to agoraphobia or fear of a future panic attack, many people with panic disorder also suffer from anticipatory anxiety. Anticipatory anxiety is when a person feels anxiety, fear or dread when thinking about an upcoming feared situation or experience they associate with panic attacks (e.g. feeling anxiety when waiting in the pre-boarding area before having to get on a plane due to fear that flying may trigger a panic attack). The anticipatory anxiety itself may trigger a limited or full panic attack before the person actually experiences the feared situation. Other times the anticipatory anxiety may make a person more vulnerable to having a full panic attack when they actually experience or enter the feared situation. This is because several anxiety

symptoms will already be present that can progress in intensity and may trigger others (e.g. rapid heartbeat due to anticipatory anxiety before entering a feared situation may lead to fear that one is having a heart attack when experiencing the feared situation which may in turn trigger rapid breathing, sweating and other panic symptoms).

### **When do Panic Attacks Typically Start?**

The onset of panic disorder can occur at any age including childhood. Many people report their first panic attack as occurring during their teens or twenties during a period of high stress. Some people experience their first panic attack when using recreational drugs such as marijuana. The average age when panic disorder fully develops tends to be sometime between late adolescence and the mid-30s. The rate of panic disorder is higher among women in comparison to men. Many people suffering from panic disorder seek medical treatment first before seeking psychological help, and they often suffer for years before getting any kind of help. Some people with panic disorder experience constant symptoms while others have periods of weeks, months or even years during which they are symptoms free and in "remission". Studies have also shown that approximately 45 to 70% of people with panic disorder have experienced at least one "nocturnal panic attack". A nocturnal panic attack is when one awakes from sleep already in a state of panic (they are not the same thing as waking up distressed from a nightmare).

### **Related Anxieties**

Many people with panic disorder also have another disorder such as social anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, generalized anxiety disorder, specific phobia or substance abuse disorder. Panic disorder can be associated with abusing alcohol or drugs to try and reduce anxiety symptoms, missing work and being on disability. Approximately 50 to 60% of individuals with panic disorder have problems with depression. For many of these individuals the depression is likely the result of living with panic disorder and its symptoms. Living in fear of panic attacks, being avoidant of situations, and believing that the symptoms of panic reflect something dangerous is exhausting and demoralizing which may make a person with panic disorder more vulnerable to developing depression symptoms.

In its study on data from the 2002 Canadian Community Health Survey, Statscan's study also shows that the average age of onset for panic disorders is 25 and three-quarters of the sufferers had been affected by age 33. On a positive note, most of those who suffered from panic disorders (about 7 in 10) sought help from a family doctor, a psychiatrist or psychologist.