

FACTS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Panic Disorder

Did you know? Panic disorder affects 4% of the general population of the United States.

"Panic disorder" (PD) is a popular term for a condition that consists in fairly short episodes of sudden, unexpected anxiety. The episodes typically last less than half an hour, and most physicians would prefer to call them "panic attacks." The attacks are often described as feelings that something terrible is going to happen (impending doom), coupled with a sense of hopelessness and despair. Here is the way a handbook used by psychiatrists describes typical attacks:

"The essential feature of a panic attack is a discrete period of intense fear or discomfort... The attack has a sudden onset and builds to a peak rapidly (usually in 10 minutes or less) and is often accompanied by a sense of imminent danger or impending doom and an urge to escape."¹

Women are commonly thought to be twice as susceptible to PD as men, but at least one authority has suggested that men are more prone than women to mask their symptoms by drinking alcohol, so it might be harder to detect the disorder in men (drinking alcohol to cope with the symptoms is certainly not recommended, and alcohol is one of the "triggers" that can bring on the attacks). There seems to be a genetic factor, or at least a tendency for the disorder to run in families. Children of parents who have PD are much more likely to develop the disorder. However, it is rare for the disorder to occur in children or to begin in adults over the age of 45. Nearly half of adults with PD experience anxiety as associated with a particular place, or places. When this occurs, it is called "panic disorder with agoraphobia." People who have this kind of panic attack are afraid of being in any place or situation from which it might be hard to escape if they have an attack. Because of this fear, they avoid the place or situation. People with agoraphobia are often afraid to stand in line, be in a crowd, or ride in cars or other vehicles.

What causes PD? There are some well known "triggers" of panic attack: Alcohol, especially binge drinking; fear of having another attack (so-called anticipatory anxiety); and prolonged stress are among the most common. Also, illegal drugs such as cocaine and marijuana, and excessive coffee (or drinks containing caffeine) can start the attacks. On a deeper level, incorrect levels of chemicals in the brain (neurotransmitters) may interfere with the way the brain handles information and so distort perception. Certain heart conditions (mitral valve prolapse) may increase the risk of developing the disorder. But this is a difficult subject, and most medical experts agree that the underlying reasons for PD are not well understood.

Treatment for panic attacks is almost always effective to some degree, but there is no guaranteed cure, nor is there a completely reliable means of preventing them. Counseling is important, especially when it includes reassurance that panic attacks are just what they are and nothing more, that they will not lead to something worse, that persons with PD are not going to go crazy, and that people don't die from panic attacks.

Medication is important, although benefits vary from person to person. Anti-depressant medicine in particular is often helpful, especially when there are few or no physical complaints. A class of medicines called benzodiazepines is useful when there are physical symptoms, such as extreme fatigue, stomach problems (acid reflux), and chest pain not related to the heart. The use of Paxil to treat PD has been strongly criticized. Many herbal remedies have been recommended in the popular literature, but your physician or psychiatrist should have the last word on these.

The literature on PD is huge. The above information is an account of the main features of the disorder. There are so many different ways in which people may experience panic attacks that the beginning student of the disorder can easily become confused. A more complete (and very good) account can be found by entering http://content.health.msn.com/condition_center/anxiety_panic_disorders on your

¹ American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV)

Internet browser. A very detailed account can be found by entering "tAPir Times" then choosing "Panic Disorders: A Comprehensive Overview." A useful screening self-test can be found at:
<http://www.nih.gov/news/HealthWise/Jul97/quiz1.htm>