

Panic Disorder

Panic disorder is a mental health condition characterised by **recurrent panic attacks** and ongoing concern about having further attacks. This leaflet provides general information about panic disorder and how it is understood in psychiatric care.

What Is a Panic Attack?

A panic attack is a sudden surge of intense fear or discomfort that reaches a peak within minutes.

Symptoms may include:

- Palpitations or rapid heartbeat
- Shortness of breath
- Chest tightness
- Dizziness or light-headedness
- Sweating or trembling
- Nausea
- Feelings of unreality or detachment
- Fear of losing control or dying

Panic attacks are **not dangerous**, but they can feel overwhelming.

What Is Panic Disorder?

Panic disorder involves:

- Recurrent, unexpected panic attacks
- Persistent worry about having more attacks
- Changes in behaviour to avoid attacks or situations

The fear of panic can become as distressing as the attacks themselves.

Why Panic Attacks Happen

Panic attacks are linked to:

- Activation of the body's **fight-or-flight response**

- Sudden misinterpretation of physical sensations as dangerous

The body reacts as if there is a threat, even when there is none.

The Panic Cycle

Panic disorder often follows a cycle:

1. Physical sensations (e.g. rapid heartbeat)
2. Fearful interpretation (“Something is wrong”)
3. Increased anxiety
4. Escalation of physical symptoms
5. Panic attack

Understanding this cycle helps guide treatment.

Panic Attacks and Physical Health

Panic attacks can feel similar to serious medical conditions.

Medical assessment is important to rule out physical causes where appropriate.

Once physical causes are excluded, panic attacks are understood as a **functional stress response**, not a sign of physical damage.

Avoidance and Safety Behaviours

People with panic disorder may:

- Avoid places or activities
- Seek reassurance repeatedly
- Use safety behaviours to prevent panic

These strategies may reduce fear temporarily but often maintain panic over time.

Diagnosis and Assessment

Diagnosis is based on:

- Clinical assessment

- Symptom patterns and frequency
- Impact on daily functioning

Assessment may take time, particularly if panic occurs alongside other conditions.

Treatment Approaches

Treatment may include:

- Psychological therapies focused on understanding and reducing panic
- Medication where appropriate
- Education about panic physiology

Treatment is tailored to individual needs.

Recovery and Outlook

Many people with panic disorder:

- Experience significant improvement with treatment
- Learn to tolerate bodily sensations without fear
- Regain confidence and independence

Recovery is often **gradual**, with practice and support.

When to Seek Help

Professional support is recommended if:

- Panic attacks are recurrent
- Fear of panic limits daily activities
- Avoidance is increasing

Early support can reduce long-term impact.

Summary

Panic disorder is a common and treatable condition involving sudden fear responses and worry about recurrence.

With appropriate care, many people learn to manage panic and return to normal functioning.
