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# Panic Attacks

## Public Education

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**Cite as:** Panic Attacks: Public Education. Brisbane (AU): Exon Publications; 2024. Published on 29 Jul 2024.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36255/panic-attacks-causes-symptoms-diagnosis-treatment>

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## Abstract

Panic attacks are sudden and intense episodes of fear and discomfort that can come without warning and can significantly impact a person's life. This article provides an overview of panic attacks, covering what they are, their types, symptoms, causes, and risk factors. It explains how panic attacks differ from normal mood changes and details the process of diagnosing them. The article also explores various treatment and management options, including medications and therapies, to help those affected. Written in simple terms, this article aims to help patients, their loved ones, and the general public understand panic attacks and how to manage them effectively.

**Keywords:** Causes of Panic Attacks; Diagnosis of Panic Attacks; Introduction to Panic Attacks; Mood Changes vs

Panic Attacks; Patterns of Panic Attacks; Risk Factors for Panic Attacks; Symptoms of Panic Attacks; Treatment and Management of Panic Attacks; Types of Panic Attacks

## Introduction to Panic Attacks

Panic attacks are sudden, intense episodes of fear and discomfort that can occur unexpectedly or in response to specific triggers. These episodes are characterized by a variety of physical and psychological symptoms that can be extremely distressing and debilitating. Unlike typical anxiety or stress responses, panic attacks often seem to come out of nowhere and can significantly impact a person's quality of life. Understanding panic attacks is crucial for recognizing the signs, seeking appropriate treatment, and managing the condition effectively.

## Types of Panic Attacks

Panic attacks can be broadly categorized into two types: expected (or cued) and unexpected (or uncued). Expected panic attacks occur in situations where a person anticipates or fears a specific trigger, such as public speaking, crowded places, or flying. These attacks are often linked to specific phobias or social anxiety disorders. Unexpected panic attacks, on the other hand, occur without any apparent reason or trigger. These attacks can happen at any time, even during sleep, and are often associated with panic disorder. Identifying the type of panic attack can help in understanding the underlying causes and developing effective coping strategies.

## Patterns of Panic Attacks

The pattern of panic attacks can vary widely among individuals. Some people may experience frequent attacks, while others may have only a few episodes throughout their lives. Panic attacks can occur as isolated events or as part

of a pattern associated with panic disorder, where recurrent attacks lead to persistent concern about future attacks and changes in behavior to avoid them. In some cases, panic attacks may cluster over a short period, with several attacks occurring within days or weeks, followed by long periods without any episodes.

## Mood Changes vs Panic Attacks

It is important to differentiate between normal mood changes and panic attacks. While everyone experiences fluctuations in mood due to stress, life events, or changes in circumstances, panic attacks are distinct episodes of intense fear and discomfort that arise suddenly and often without warning. Mood changes, such as feeling sad, anxious, or irritable, typically build up gradually and are related to specific events or ongoing stressors. In contrast, panic attacks involve abrupt onset of physical symptoms like rapid heartbeat, sweating, trembling, shortness of breath, and a sense of impending doom. Understanding the difference between normal mood changes and panic attacks is crucial for recognizing when professional help may be needed.

## Symptoms of Panic Attacks

The symptoms of panic attacks are both physical and psychological. Common physical symptoms include a racing or pounding heart, sweating, trembling or shaking, shortness of breath or a feeling of being smothered, chest pain or discomfort, nausea or abdominal distress, dizziness or light-headedness, chills or hot flashes, and numbness or tingling sensations. Psychological symptoms often involve intense fear of losing control, going crazy, or dying. During a panic attack, individuals may feel detached from reality or themselves, a sensation known as depersonalization or derealization. These symptoms typically peak within

minutes and can be so severe that they mimic those of a heart attack or other serious medical conditions, leading individuals to seek emergency medical care.

## Causes of Panic Attacks

The causes of panic attacks are multifactorial, involving a combination of genetic, biological, environmental, and psychological factors. Genetics play a significant role, as panic disorder tends to run in families. Studies have identified several genes that may be involved, such as the serotonin transporter gene (SLC6A4) and the catechol-O-methyltransferase (COMT) gene. Neurotransmitter imbalances, particularly involving serotonin, norepinephrine, and gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), are also linked to panic attacks. Environmental factors, such as exposure to significant stress, trauma, or major life changes, can trigger panic attacks. Psychological factors, including personality traits, coping mechanisms, and learned behaviors, also contribute to the development of panic attacks.

## Risk Factors for Panic Attacks

Several risk factors can increase the likelihood of experiencing panic attacks. A family history of panic attacks or other anxiety disorders is a significant risk factor. Major life stressors, such as the death of a loved one, divorce, or job loss, can trigger panic attacks. Chronic medical conditions, such as heart disease, asthma, or thyroid problems, are also associated with a higher risk of panic attacks. Substance abuse, including alcohol and drugs, can both contribute to and result from panic attacks. Certain personality traits, such as being overly sensitive to stress or prone to negative thinking, can make individuals more susceptible to panic attacks.

## Diagnosis of Panic Attacks

Diagnosing panic attacks involves a comprehensive evaluation by a healthcare provider, usually a psychiatrist or psychologist. The evaluation includes a detailed discussion of symptoms, medical history, and family history. Diagnostic criteria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) are used to identify panic disorder and other related conditions. The healthcare provider may also use standardized questionnaires and rating scales, such as the Panic Disorder Severity Scale (PDSS) or the Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale (HAM-A), to assess the severity of symptoms. In some cases, laboratory tests may be conducted to rule out other medical conditions that could be causing symptoms similar to those of panic attacks.

## Treatment and Management of Panic Attacks

Treatment for panic attacks typically involves a combination of medication, psychotherapy, and lifestyle changes. Antidepressant medications, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) like fluoxetine (Prozac) and sertraline (Zoloft), are commonly prescribed to help balance neurotransmitters in the brain. Benzodiazepines (e.g., diazepam [Valium] and alprazolam [Xanax]) may be used for short-term relief of acute symptoms, but they carry a risk of dependency and are generally not recommended for long-term use. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is one of the most effective forms of psychotherapy for panic attacks, focusing on changing negative thought patterns and behaviors. Exposure therapy, a type of CBT, involves gradual exposure to feared situations to reduce avoidance behaviors. Lifestyle changes, such as regular exercise, a healthy diet, adequate sleep, and stress management, play

a crucial role in managing panic attacks. Techniques like deep breathing, mindfulness meditation, and progressive muscle relaxation can help reduce the intensity and frequency of panic attacks. Support from family and friends, as well as participation in support groups, can provide additional help. A comprehensive treatment plan tailored to the individual's needs can significantly improve outcomes.

## Conclusion

Panic attacks are a serious but treatable condition that affects millions of people worldwide. Understanding the different aspects of panic attacks, from their types and patterns to their symptoms and causes, is essential for effective management. Recognizing the risk factors and seeking a proper diagnosis are crucial steps in addressing the condition. With appropriate treatment and support, individuals with panic attacks can lead fulfilling lives. Early detection, appropriate treatment, and supportive measures are key to managing panic attacks and improving quality of life.

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