

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Panic disorder</b>	<b>1</b>
Symptoms of panic disorder	1
Anxiety	1
Panic attacks	1
When to get help	3
Treatments for panic disorder	3
Talking therapies	4
Medicine	4
Referral to a specialist	5
Video: Talking therapies for stress, anxiety and depression	5
Things you can try yourself	5
What to do during a panic attack	6
Preventing a further attack	6
Support groups	6
Complications of panic disorder	7
Causes	7
Panic disorder in children	8

# Panic disorder

**Panic disorder is an anxiety disorder where you regularly have sudden attacks of panic or fear.**

Everyone experiences feelings of [anxiety](#) and panic at certain times. It's a natural response to stressful or dangerous situations.

But someone with panic disorder has feelings of anxiety, stress and panic regularly and at any time, often for no apparent reason.

## Symptoms of panic disorder

### Anxiety

Anxiety is a feeling of unease. It can range from mild to severe, and can include feelings of worry and fear. Panic is the most severe form of anxiety.

You may start to avoid certain situations because you fear they'll trigger another attack.

This can create a cycle of living "in fear of fear". It can add to your sense of panic and may cause you to have more attacks.

### Panic attacks

During a panic attack you get a rush of intense mental and physical symptoms. It can come on very quickly and for no apparent reason.

A panic attack can be very frightening and distressing.

Symptoms include:

- a racing heartbeat
- feeling [faint](#)
- sweating
- nausea
- chest pain
- [shortness of breath](#)
- trembling
- hot flushes
- chills
- shaky limbs
- a choking sensation
- dizziness
- numbness or [pins and needles](#)
- [dry mouth](#)
- a feeling of dread or a fear of dying
- a churning stomach
- a tingling in your fingers
- feeling like you're not connected to your body

Most panic attacks last between 5 and 20 minutes. Some have been reported to last up to an hour.

The number of attacks you have will depend on how severe your condition is. Some people have attacks once or twice a month, while others have them several times a week.

Although panic attacks are frightening, they're not dangerous. An attack will not cause you any physical harm, and it's unlikely you'll be admitted to hospital if you have one.

Be aware that most of these symptoms can also be symptoms of other conditions or problems, so you may not always be experiencing a panic attack.

For example, you may have a racing heartbeat if you have very low blood pressure.

## When to get help

See a GP if you've been experiencing symptoms of panic disorder.

They'll ask you to describe your symptoms, how often you get them, and how long you have had them.

They may also carry out a physical examination to rule out other conditions that could be causing your symptoms.

It can sometimes be difficult to talk about your feelings, emotions and personal life, but try not to feel anxious or embarrassed.

You may be diagnosed with panic disorder if you have regular and unexpected panic attacks followed by at least a month of continuous worry or concern about having further attacks.

## Treatments for panic disorder

Treatment aims to reduce the number of panic attacks you have and ease your symptoms.

[Talking therapies](#) and medicine are the main treatments for panic disorder. Your treatment will

depend on your symptoms.

## Talking therapies

You can refer yourself directly to a talking therapies service for treatment based on [cognitive behavioural therapy \(CBT\)](#).

### ➔ Find a talking therapies service (England only)

If you prefer, you can see a GP and they can refer you.

Your therapist may discuss with you how you react when you have a panic attack and what you think about.

They can teach you ways of changing your behaviour to help you keep calm during an attack.

You may need to see your GP regularly while you're having CBT so they can assess your progress.

## Medicine

If you and your doctor think it might be helpful, you may be prescribed:

- a type of [antidepressant](#) called a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) or, if SSRIs are not suitable, a tricyclic antidepressant (usually imipramine or clomipramine)
- an anti-epilepsy medicine such as [pregabalin](#) or, if your anxiety is severe, [clonazepam](#) (these medicines are also beneficial for treating anxiety)

[Antidepressants](#) can take 2 to 4 weeks before they start to work, and up to 8 weeks to work fully.

Keep taking your medicines, even if you feel they're not working, and only stop taking them if your GP

advises you to do so.

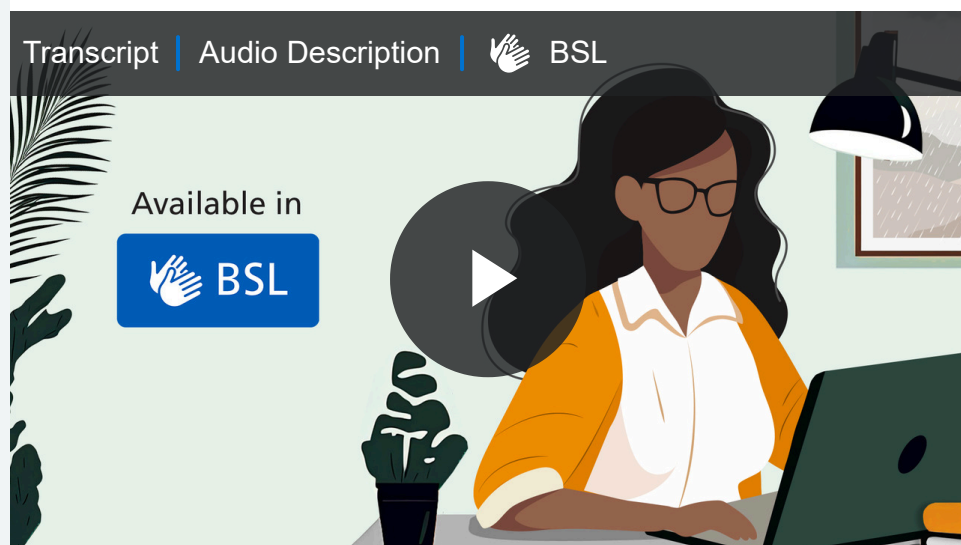
## Referral to a specialist

If your symptoms do not improve after CBT, medicine and connecting with a support group, your GP may refer you to a mental health specialist such as a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist.

The specialist will carry out an assessment and devise a treatment plan to help you manage your symptoms.

### Video: Talking therapies for stress, anxiety and depression

Animated video explaining self-referral to talking therapies services for stress, anxiety or depression. Includes British Sign Language (BSL) translation.



Media last reviewed: 14 March 2022

Media review due: 14 March 2025

## Things you can try yourself

What to do during a panic attack

The next time you feel a panic attack coming on:

- stay where you are, if possible
- breathe slowly and deeply
- remind yourself that the attack will pass
- focus on positive, peaceful and relaxing images
- remember it's not life threatening

## Preventing a further attack

It may help to:

- read a self-help book for anxiety based on the principles of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) – ask your GP to recommend one
- try activities like yoga and pilates, to help you relax
- learn [breathing exercises for stress](#) to help ease symptoms
- do [regular physical exercise](#) to reduce stress and tension
- avoid sugary food and drinks, caffeine and alcohol, and [stop smoking](#), as they can all make attacks worse

For more help on how to deal with panic attacks, read about [anxiety, fear and panic](#).

## Support groups

Panic disorder can have a big impact on your life, but support is available. It might help to speak to other people with the same condition, or to connect with a charity.

You may find the following links useful:

- [Anxiety UK](#)
- [Mind: understanding anxiety and panic attacks](#)

- [No Panic](#)
- [Triumph Over Phobia \(TOP UK\)](#)

Ask your GP about support groups for panic disorder near you.

[Find mental health services in your area](#)

## Complications of panic disorder

Panic disorder is treatable so it's best to get medical help as soon as you can.

If you do not get medical help, panic disorder can escalate and become very difficult to cope with.

You're more at risk of developing other mental health conditions, such as [agoraphobia](#) or other [phobias](#), or an alcohol or drug problem.

Having panic disorder may affect your ability to drive. The law requires you to inform the [Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency \(DVLA\)](#) about a medical condition that could impact your driving ability.

Visit GOV.UK for further information about [driving with a disability or health condition](#).

## Causes

As with many mental health conditions, the exact cause of panic disorder is not fully understood.

But it's thought to be linked to a combination of things, including:

- a traumatic or very stressful life experience, such as [bereavement](#)
- having a close family member with panic disorder



- an imbalance of neurotransmitters (chemical messengers) in the brain

## Panic disorder in children

If your child has the signs and symptoms of panic disorder, they should see a GP.

After taking a detailed medical history the GP will carry out a thorough physical examination to rule out any physical causes for the symptoms.

They may refer your child to a specialist for further assessment and treatment. The specialist may recommend a course of [CBT](#) for your child.

Read more about [anxiety disorders in children](#) or find out about [mental health support for children and young people](#).

Page last reviewed: 22 August 2023

Next review due: 22 August 2026

[Home](#)

[Health A to Z](#)

[NHS services](#)

[Live Well](#)

[Mental health](#)

[Care and support](#)

[Pregnancy](#)

[COVID-19](#)

[NHS App](#)

[Find my NHS  
number](#)

[View your GP  
health record](#)

[View your test  
results](#)

[About the NHS](#)

[Healthcare abroad](#)

[Other NHS websites](#)

[Profile editor login](#)

[About us](#)

[Give us feedback](#)

[Accessibility  
statement](#)

[Our policies](#)

[Cookies](#)