



PANIC ATTACKS



What are Panic Attacks?

Panic attacks, also known as anxiety attacks, are intense and overwhelming flashes of anxiety or fear that can be frightening to experience. They often happen suddenly and without warning, though these can also be triggered by stressful events and experiences.

Attacks usually last between 5 and 30 minutes, rarely lasting longer than an hour. These can be one time attacks, or you may experience them regularly.

If you think you might be suffering with panic attacks, have a chat with your doctor (GP) about your symptoms. They may be able to help treat the symptoms with medications – or refer you for therapy if appropriate.

What causes Panic Attacks?

Panic attacks can be linked with various mental health issues, such as Panic Disorder, Borderline Personality Disorder or phobias, but they are not necessarily symptomatic of another issue. You can have panic attacks without having an underlying mental health issue.

What are the symptoms of Panic Attacks?

You won't necessarily experience all of these symptoms at once, and may experience different symptoms from time to time depending on the severity of the attack. You may also experience other symptoms not listed here.

- Increased heart rate (like it's 'racing')
- Palpitations (like your heart is fluttering or missing beats)
- Excess sweating
- Rapid breathing (hyperventilating)
- 'Funny' sensations in your stomach (knots, heavy weights, butterflies)
- Feeling sick
- Dry mouth
- Shaking
- Feeling dizzy
- Wobbly legs (feeling like they're jelly)
- Fear that you might die or are going crazy

How are Panic Attacks treated?

The treatment for panic attacks really depends on the reason you're having them. If an underlying mental health issue causes these, then your doctor or psychiatrist will be able to address this for you. They may treat this through talking therapies, such as counselling or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), or with medications that work to tackle anxiety or depression. They may even use a combination of therapy and medication.

Whether you have an underlying mental health condition or not, talking therapies can still be very useful if you have regular attacks. These could be happening as a result of issues of which you aren't aware, and counselling provides a way of bringing these issues out in to the open for you to explore and resolve.

If you find yourself starting to have a panic attack, there are a few things you can try to either prevent an attack from happening – or lessen the severity of the attack. The following breathing exercise may help you, but you may also want to try some distraction and grounding techniques, or try practising some mindfulness and meditation. You can download our guides on these separately via the resources page on our website.

Breathing technique

First, make yourself as comfortable as you can. If you can, find somewhere to sit quietly so you're not disturbed, and loosen any clothing around your neck (like a tie, or undoing your top button). If you're feeling really dizzy as if you might faint, you can do this lying down. Close your eyes and allow your body to relax as much as possible.

1. Breathe in through your nose, as deeply as you can without it hurting, for five seconds.
2. Without holding your breath for a pause, breathe out through your mouth for five seconds.
3. Repeat this for 3 to 5 minutes - longer if needed – until you feel able to come back in to the moment.

If you find it difficult to do this on your own, you can download smartphone apps that will guide you through the process. Pop your headphones on, and follow the instructions as directed.

Further Reading

If you're suffering with panic attacks, you might also want to read our guides on distraction and grounding techniques, or meditation and mindfulness.