



# UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND UNIVERSITY HEALTH CENTER

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## Panic Attacks

Panic is a natural response which occurs in extremely stressful situations, for example, when your house is on fire. But, for 3 percent of the general population, panic attacks occur spontaneously or with little provocation. The age of onset varies, but is typically around late adolescence or in the mid-30's. These attacks come on suddenly, varying in frequency from several times a day to a few episodes a year. Initially, individuals who start having panic attacks might think they are having a heart attack or that they are going "crazy." This is not surprising because the feelings are so foreign and intense, and there are many physiologic changes that are similar to a true heart attack. If not diagnosed appropriately, a person with panic attacks may be sent away from the emergency room repeatedly without the proper interventions.

### Symptoms

Discrete period of sudden intense apprehension, fearfulness, or terror, often associated with feelings of impending doom.

- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness, light-headedness, feeling faint
- Rapid or strong heart beat
- Chest pain or discomfort
- Choking or smothering sensations
- Urgent need to escape or leave
- Sweating
- Trembling or shaking
- Nausea or abdominal distress
- A feeling of unreality or being detached from oneself
- Fear of dying
- Fear of losing control or going crazy
- Numbness or tingling sensations

### Treatment

Medication and psychotherapy have both been shown to help reduce panic attacks. A variety of medications now available are extremely effective and have few associated side effects. Psychotherapy provides 1) preventive measures which lessen the frequency of attacks, 2) coping strategies during an attack, and 3) an avenue of overcoming the psychological and social effects caused by these attacks.

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