

■ Panic Attacks and Panic Disorder ■

Panic attacks are very upsetting for your child and family. Your child may have episodes of intense fear causing physical and psychological reactions. Your child may even fear that he or she is going to die, which makes the panic even worse. Effective treatments are available that can help keep panic attacks from interfering with your child's life.

What are panic attacks?

Panic attacks are sudden, repeated episodes of intense fear or discomfort. In addition to being upsetting for your child, the attacks cause physical symptoms, such as a racing heartbeat and a feeling that it's hard to breathe. These symptoms make your child's sense of panic even greater.

Panic attacks that occur frequently enough to interfere with your child's life are called *panic disorder*. In extreme cases, he or she may develop a fear of being in places where escape is difficult or impossible, such as in public. This condition is called *agoraphobia*.

Professional evaluation and treatment are essential and can help to lessen the impact of panic attacks and panic disorder.

What do they look like?

- Panic attacks may occur suddenly and unpredictably. It is often unclear what triggers them.
- Your child feels intense fear or discomfort. Often, he or she feels that something is going to go terribly wrong, or that he or she is dying.
- Physical symptoms occur, including:
 - Pounding heartbeat (palpitations).
 - Sweating, shaking, dizziness.
 - Shortness of breath; your child may feel like he or she cannot breathe.
- The physical and psychological symptoms set up a vicious circle: your child feels like she cannot breathe, which makes her feel like something bad is going to happen, causing her to panic even more.
- If your child has repeated panic attacks, he or she may be afraid to be away from home and may refuse to go out, even to attend school.

What are some possible complications of panic attacks?

- Panic attacks can interfere with school and other activities, especially if your child becomes fearful of going out.
- People with panic disorder may have other psychiatric disorders as well, such as anxiety, depression, and drug or alcohol abuse.

What puts your child at risk of panic attacks?

- Attacks most commonly start between ages 15 and 19.
- They may be more likely to occur in teens with other psychiatric disorders, including anxiety and depression, drug or alcohol abuse, or phobias (irrational fears).

Can panic attacks be prevented?

There is no known way to prevent initial panic attacks. However, effective treatments may help to prevent future attacks.

How are panic attacks treated?

Even for doctors, it can be difficult to determine that your child is having a panic attack. For example, shortness of breath may lead to tests for asthma and other breathing disorders. After a medical examination, your doctor may be able to reassure you and your child that there is no physical problem causing shortness of breath, racing heartbeat, or similar symptoms.

We may recommend a visit to a child and adolescent psychiatrist or other mental health professional. This specialist will perform a thorough evaluation and recommend a plan to treat your child's panic attacks.

- Several types of treatment can help teens (and adults) with panic attacks and panic disorder:
 - Medications, including antidepressants. These drugs may help make panic attacks less frequent.
 - Counseling or psychotherapy may help your child to reduce stress and other factors that trigger panic attacks, as well as learn new ways of interrupting panic attacks when they start.
 - A combination of medications and psychotherapy is most helpful for many patients.

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- Panic attacks may lessen over time, especially with good medical follow-up and mental health care.

When should I call your office?

If your child's panic attacks continue or seem to get worse after the start of treatment, call your mental health

provider. (If your child has been prescribed antidepressant medications, it may be a few weeks before they take full effect.) If you cannot reach your mental health provider and you're concerned about panic attacks or other problems, call our office.