

## Panic Attacks and Panic Disorder

### Definition

A panic attack is a sudden surge of intense fear or discomfort. Panic disorder is diagnosed when a person experiences recurrent, unexpected panic attacks followed by at least one month of persistent concern about additional attacks or their consequences, or significant changes in behaviour (such as avoiding situations associated with previous attacks).

### Prevalence

Each year, approximately 1-2% of Canadian adults develop panic disorder, but up to a one-third of people may experience a panic attack at some point in their lives. Panic disorder affects about 4% of Canadians over their lifetime. Women are about twice as likely as men to develop panic disorder.

### Signs and Symptoms

Symptoms experienced during a panic attack may include:

- Rapid or irregular heartbeat
- Chest pain or tightness,
- Sweating,
- Trembling or shaking,
- Shortness of breath,
- Dizziness or nausea, and
- Numbness or tingling in the fingers or toes.

### Risk Factors

- Existing medical or mental health conditions (e.g., diabetes, depression, cardiovascular or respiratory disease, anxiety disorders, and trauma- or stress-related disorders)
- Family history of panic disorder or other anxiety disorders
- Traumatic life events including childhood abuse
- Excessive consumption of nicotine, caffeine, or alcohol

### Treatments

1. **Psychotherapy:** Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) is one of the most well-established and evidence-based treatments for panic disorder. It targets negative appraisals about the physical sensations of panic and related behavioural responses. Treatment for panic disorder often includes interoceptive exposure to bodily sensations (e.g., racing heart, chest tightness, numbness or tingling, dizziness, nausea), reinforcing that these sensations are not life-threatening.
2. **Medications:** Antidepressant medications such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) are commonly prescribed and have strong evidence supporting their effectiveness. Benzodiazepines may be used **for short-term use** due to the risk of dependence. Medications are typically used alongside psychotherapy.

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3. **Lifestyle changes:** Managing stress; reducing or avoiding alcohol, nicotine, and caffeine; maintaining a balanced diet; engaging in regular exercise; practicing good sleep hygiene; establishing daily routines; and using breathing techniques may help reduce symptom severity. If symptoms interfere with daily functioning, seeking support from a registered psychologist, physician, or other qualified health professional is recommended.

### **Sources**

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health: [Panic Disorder Overview](#)

Canadian Mental Health Association BC: [Panic Disorder](#)

Cleveland Clinic: [Panic Attacks & Panic Disorder](#)

National Institute of Mental Health: [Panic Disorder: What You Need to Know](#)