

# ANXIETY & PANIC

## Anxiety & Panic Disorder

Anxiety is a natural response to stress and typically involves a feeling of fear and worry about what's to come. One of the most common types of anxiety in people with heart conditions is Panic.

## What Are the Symptoms of a Panic Attack?

- Feeling intense fear and being afraid that something terrible is about to happen.
- Worrying about losing control.
- Worrying about dying, going crazy, or having a heart attack.
- Having many body symptoms such as a pounding heart, chest pain, upset stomach, diarrhea, shaking, sweating, or being hot or cold.
- Feeling like you are choking or that you can't get your breath.
- Being dizzy, faint, or light-headed
- Numb or tingling arms, legs, or other parts of the body.
- Feeling detached or as if you are watching yourself from outside your body.

These sensations start suddenly and become very strong, usually within 10 minutes. The attacks often 'come out of the blue'.

## Panic Disorder

When panic attacks occur repeatedly, and out of the blue, it may be "Panic Disorder".

These attacks can happen many times every day or every week, and can occur in the middle of the night. People with this condition might worry about having these panic attacks all the time. Or the person might start organizing their life to try to avoid having another panic attack. If this happens, it can get in the way of work and personal life.

It is important to get treatment for your anxiety and panic because it has been shown to be a risk factor for heart disease.

## How Does It Occur?

Panic is a "fight or flight" reaction that occurs for no apparent reason. A panic attack can feel very scary, but having one attack doesn't usually mean that you are developing panic disorder.

Many people with panic disorder also develop 'agoraphobia' – they avoid going places or doing things because they are afraid they will panic and won't have any help. Or the person might be worried they will have a panic attack and people will notice, which could be embarrassing. For example, people with this will often avoid the grocery store, malls, movie theatres, restaurants and crowds.

It is common for a person to have depression along with panic disorder.

## How Is It Diagnosed?

Your health care provider or a mental health professional can tell you if your symptoms are caused by panic disorder. You will be asked about your symptoms and any drug or alcohol use. No blood tests can diagnose panic disorder.

If you worry about having another panic attack, or have the symptoms of panic attacks for more than 30 days, it usually means that you have panic disorder.

## How Is It Treated?

Panic disorder can be successfully managed with psychotherapy and/or medicine. It is possible, but more difficult, to treat yourself through self-help materials. Discuss these treatment choices with your doctor or a mental health professional.

## Medicine

Several medicines can help treat panic disorder. Your doctor will work with you to carefully select the best one for you. No non-prescription medicines are available to treat panic disorder.

## Talk Therapy

Studies have shown that seeing a psychologist or other mental health professional is helpful. The treatment for Panic Disorder is usually short-term (6-10 sessions, on average). A form of therapy that is very helpful with panic disorder is Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT). CBT is a way to help you identify and change thoughts and behaviours that lead to panic attacks.

Challenging the negative thoughts that maintain the anxiety can help you to control panic attacks and the fear that comes with it.

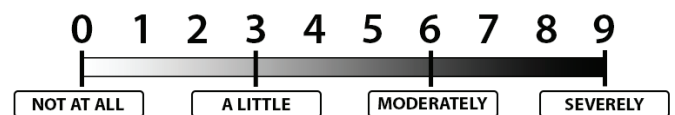
## What Can I Do to Help Myself?

Here are some activities that can help control panic disorder:

- Exercise for at least 20 minutes every day. For example, take a brisk walk.
- Learn which activities make you feel better and do them often.
- Talk to your family and friends.
- Eat a healthy diet.
- Get 6 to 8 hours of sleep per night.
- Keep a regular schedule for going to sleep and getting up.
- Try not to use alcohol or drugs.
- Learn relaxation techniques or yoga.
- Don't get too focused on trying to avoid panic. The more you focus on it, the worse it will probably get.
- The key is to learn to live a full life even with these anxiety symptoms.

## When Should I Seek Help?

Ask the following question. Over the last two weeks how much have I been bothered by feeling anxious or nervous?



If you score a 4 or more, it would be a good idea to talk to your health care provider or a mental health professional about how you feel.

Most communities in BC have Mental Health Centers where you can find treatment for anxiety and/or panic. There are free self-help materials at:

[www.KeltysKey.com](http://www.KeltysKey.com)

Talk to your clinic nurse, or your family doctor, about the options that may be available to you.

This material has been reviewed and approved by patients, families and staff.

