Panic Disorder

Fear is a basic response that readies a person to react to danger. This fear response prepares the body for action either to flee from a situation or prepare to protect oneself by using physical force. That is why it is sometimes called the "fight or flight" response.

When this fear response becomes overwhelming or is triggered at times when it is not needed, it becomes a problem. Anxiety disorders are illnesses related to this fear response becoming activated in a situation when it is not needed or more strongly than is needed. People who experience panic disorder (a type of anxiety disorder) have repeated episodes of intense fear or discomfort that strike suddenly and can be emotionally, physically, and psychologically disabling.

An article in the May 17, 2000, issue of *JAMA* reports on a study testing the use of a medication, cognitive-behavioral therapy (a type of psychological therapy), and a combination of both to treat panic disorder.

PANIC ATTACKS:

Some symptoms of a panic attack are:

- Sudden feeling of terror
- Racing or pounding heartbeat
- Chest pain
- Feeling unsteady or experiencing dizziness or feeling light-headed
- Difficulty breathing: shortness of breath or experiencing choking or smothering sensations
- Numbness or tingling
- Sweating
- Nausea or stomach pains
- Fear of losing control
- Sense of unreality
- Sense of impending doom or a fear of dying or "going crazy"

ANTICIPATORY ANXIETY:

Part of the treatment for panic disorder is to treat the anxiety surrounding the fear of experiencing another panic attack. This fear is called **anticipatory anxiety**. The person may also have **phobias**, or irrational fears, about places or situations where the panic attacks have occurred and try to create a **zone of safety** for himself or herself by avoiding those places or situations.

TREATMENT:

The symptoms for panic disorder are similar to symptoms for some other medical conditions, such as heart problems or thyroid conditions. Therefore, before undergoing treatment for panic disorder a person should have a thorough medical examination.

Some of the treatments used to treat panic disorder are:

- Medication – drugs used to block panic attacks from occurring
- Cognitive-behavioral therapy – the patient is helped to change thought patterns and behavior patterns related to the panic attacks
- Combination therapy – a combination of both medication and cognitive-behavioral therapy

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Institute of Mental Health
  Understanding Panic Disorder
  888/8-ANXIETY or 301/443-4513
  www.nimh.nih.gov
- American Psychiatric Association
  Let's Talk Facts About … Panic Disorder
  1400 K St., N.W.
  Washington, DC 20005
  Fax on demand 202/682-6000
  or www.psych.org

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm. A previous *JAMA* Patient Page on obsessive–compulsive disorder (another type of anxiety disorder) was published on November 25, 1998.

Additional Sources: National Institute of Mental Health, American Psychiatric Association, Anxiety Disorders Association of America, The AMA Complete Guide to Women's Health

Brian Pace, MA, Writer
Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

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