

Panic attack information sheet

What a panic attack is, what it isn't, and what tends to help in the moment.

What is happening in the body

- A panic attack is a maximum activation of the sympathetic nervous system. The brain has read a signal as dangerous and has triggered the same response it would for an immediate physical threat: heart rate up, breathing fast, blood moved to the large muscles, digestion paused.
- The sensations are real and produced by real physiological systems. They are not imagined.

How long a panic attack lasts

- A panic attack peaks within about ten minutes and ends on its own, usually within twenty to thirty minutes from start to finish.
- The body is not capable of sustaining maximum activation for longer than that. The system runs out of fuel and resets.

Panic attack vs. heart attack

- A panic attack typically peaks fast, includes a sense of unreality, often involves tingling and a strong urge to escape, and ends on its own.
- A heart attack tends to involve sustained pressure or pain, often radiating to the arm, jaw, or back, and does not pass with rest. A first unexplained chest pain deserves a clinical evaluation either way.

Two things that help in the moment

- Lengthen the exhale relative to the inhale, in for four seconds, out for six or seven, for about two minutes. The exhale activates the parasympathetic side of the nervous system.
- Move. Stand up, walk for five minutes, or step outside. Movement releases the muscle tension the stress response builds.

What does not help

- Checking the pulse repeatedly. It keeps the nervous system in monitoring mode.
- Holding the breath to test whether the symptoms are still there. It tightens the chest wall and prolongs the episode.
- Searching online for symptoms. The brain reads the search itself as evidence that something is wrong.

A first unexplained chest pain or panic episode deserves a clinical evaluation. Once cardiac causes have been ruled out, recurring panic is best addressed with a clinician familiar with anxiety disorders.

Reviewed by Shariq Refai, MD, MBA. Educational only. Not medical advice.

