What Is a Panic Attack?

People who suffer from depression and anxiety may have panic attacks, sudden bursts of panic that come on without warning and are associated with severe physical symptoms. Panic attacks are so strong that people often think they are having a heart attack or that they are going to die.

Symptoms include:

- Sweating
- Weakness
- Faintness and dizziness
- Tingling or numbness in the limbs
- Flushing, feeling hot or chilled
- Nausea
- Chest pains
- Choking or smothering sensation
- Pounding heart
- Racing thoughts

Panic attacks usually peak within 10 minutes and can happen anytime, even during sleep. Not everyone who has a panic attack has an anxiety disorder. However, repeated panic attacks warrant a doctor's care.

For Women Only

One in five women will experience depression at some point in life, and women suffer from depression twice as much as men. **Why:** Women may be more susceptible to depression because of hormone fluctuations, especially during adolescence, after giving birth, before menstruation and during perimenopause (the years leading up to menopause). It is a myth that depression is a sign of weakness or a normal part of a woman's life — the disorder can be treated as successfully in women as in men.

More on Depression

Married people and those in ongoing relationships have a lower rate of clinical depression than those living alone. However, unhappily married people have the highest rates.

More than 6 million older adults suffer from depression, but unfortunately, only about 10 percent get treated. Depression is also a common companion to illnesses occurring in older people.

Over-the-counter or prescription drugs can contribute to depression. These include antihistamines, tranquilizers, antihypertensives, sleeping pills and narcotics.

In some families, major depression seems to occur generation after generation. However, it also occurs in people who have no family history of the condition. Experts think that depression is caused by a complex combination of genetic and environmental factors.

Recent studies suggest that St. John's wort is of no benefit in treating moderate to severe depression. Don't take St. John's wort if you are taking other medications (it can react with many drugs), and talk with your doctor before starting any herbal treatment.

There is hope. With available treatment, 80 percent of people with serious depression can have significant improvement in their symptoms, which can often be relieved in a matter of weeks.

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DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

Your Guide to Help and Hope

SAMPLE

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Depression and anxiety are crippling illnesses that can strike anyone of any race, age or income level. Many people who suffer from depression and anxiety go without treatment because they don't recognize the symptoms, are ashamed or embarrassed, or are too disabled by symptoms to reach out for help. It's important to remember that millions suffer from these conditions, and treatment holds the promise of a return to a full, active, hopeful life.

Symptoms of Depression

- Persistent sad or anxious feelings
- Feelings of hopelessness or emptiness
- Inappropriate guilt
- Fatigue and irritability
- Diminished pleasure or interest in usual activities, including sex
- Physical ailments, such as headaches or digestive problems, that are not easily explained and do not respond to treatment
- Difficulty making decisions and forgetfulness
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Appetite changes (appetite loss or overeating)
- Thoughts of death or suicide or attempting suicide

If you experience five or more of these signs for two or more weeks, seek medical help. If you or someone you know has thoughts of suicide, don't wait — get help immediately. It could save a life.

Signs of Anxiety Disorder

Anxiety and depression often occur together, but they can also occur separately. There are several types of anxiety disorders, including phobias, panic disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, social anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, all of which have their own symptoms. Anxiety disorder symptoms may include:

- Persistent anxious thoughts or rituals you can't control
- Panic attacks
- Obsessions
- Mentally reliving trauma
- Irrational fears
- Avoiding situations, places or people that produce anxiety

Eliminate caffeine and alcohol.

Heavy caffeine use can affect mood and make depression worse. Alcohol is a depressant in itself and may interfere with medications.

Helpful Resources

- National Alliance on Mental Illness: 1-800-950-6264
- Depression and Bipolar Support Alliance: 1-800-826-3632
- National Institute of Mental Health: 1-866-615-6464
- Call a community center or local hospital for support groups in your area.
- Check the employee assistance program (EAP) if your company has one.

Get Help, Get Well

If you or someone you care about suffers from depression or anxiety, talk with your doctor. It's important to get help as soon as possible — without treatment, depression and anxiety can last for months, years or even a lifetime. Treatment options include:

Talk therapy. There are many mental health professionals who can treat depression and anxiety, including psychiatrists, clinical social workers, counselors, psychologists and psychiatric nurses. Therapy may only be needed for a short time, but, however long, commit to staying with it until you feel better. Check your insurance coverage, and if cost is an issue, look into county or state programs that have sliding-scale rates.

Medication. Newer anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medications cause fewer side effects and are usually quite effective. Some anti-depressant medications are also effective for treating anxiety, especially certain selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). Anti-depressant medications are often used to treat depression and anxiety that occur together. **Keep in mind:** Medications may take several weeks to reduce symptoms and may cause side effects such as fatigue, insomnia, nausea, heart palpitations, agitation and sexual problems.

Joining a support group. Talking with others who share your condition can help you cope. Ask your health care provider, counselor, minister or therapist for support group recommendations, or call a community center or hospital about support groups in your area.

Taking care of yourself. Exercise 30 minutes 4-5 days a week. Working out may help reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression. Get plenty of rest, eat a well-balanced, nutritious diet and find healthy ways to reduce stress. Don't be afraid to ask friends and family for support and help.

Nourishing your spirit. Try to get spiritual support from whatever source you prefer. Attending religious services, praying or practicing meditation, for example, can help you cope with your symptoms and restore inner peace. Making an effort to read, listen to music, socialize, practice a hobby, travel and engage in other activities you enjoy helps the healing process.

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