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What happens to your body during a panic attack?

We all need a bit of stress and anxiety to motivate us. But what happens when your body takes it to extremes? Anxiety disorders (where anxiety is so extreme it affects your functioning) comes in all shapes and forms, and often goes hand in hand with panic attacks. Fortunately, there is effective treatment.

Panic attacks happen when **anxiety** suddenly reaches a peak, often for no apparent reason. At least 1 in 10 people suffer them occasionally, and while they usually last just 5-10 minutes, it can feel like a lifetime.

Panic attack or heart attack?

The symptoms of panic attacks are remarkably like those of a **heart attack**, so it's not surprising that people convince themselves they're going to die, which makes them more anxious, which makes their symptoms worse ... You get the picture.

Palpitations, feeling trembly and sick, dry mouth, **breathlessness**, choking and **chest pains** are often accompanied by a feeling that you're dying or going mad. Breathing too fast lowers carbon dioxide levels in your body, often making you light-headed and causing **pins and needles**, which also raises anxiety more.

In fact, these symptoms are also very similar to what happens if you're faced with sudden danger, because they have the same cause. The 'fight or flight' response is an inbuilt survival mechanism, which allowed your ancestors to run away from predators or stand and fight them with extra reserves of strength. It's largely down to release of a hormone called adrenaline, which your body also produces when you're excited.

Fight or flight

Panic attacks are often an extension of anxiety, which is another inbuilt response. If your ancestors hadn't been on the lookout for danger, they would likely never have survived to produce children and you wouldn't be here. Fight or flight may have been very useful when there was a sabre-toothed tiger around every corner, but living with it constantly is physically and emotionally exhausting.

Anxiety and panic attacks happen when your body starts misinterpreting signals around it. There are several kinds of anxiety disorder. [Social anxiety](#), possibly the most common, is where you worry about how other people perceive you. [Phobias](#) are anxiety about a particular thing or things - spiders, getting trapped, confined spaces, etc. [Generalised anxiety disorder](#) is much more common than we used to think - here, you turn everything into a potential catastrophe.

Treating panic attacks

The first step to recovering from an anxiety disorder is to recognise it. Many folk believe excessive anxiety shows weakness, or a lack of moral fibre. In fact, it's a very real medical condition with highly effective treatment, but you need to talk about your feelings to access help.

Your doctor won't be at all surprised to hear your story - anxiety disorders affect up to 1 in 20 Britons at any one time - so they'll understand how distressing it is and will know exactly what to do. Talking therapy is almost always the first-line treatment. Not only does it help relieve your symptoms, it gives you the tools you need to tackle future episodes early and stop them escalating.

In most areas of the UK, you'll be referred to a service called IAPT, or Improving Access to Psychological Therapies. You can also refer yourself by going to the [NHS website](#) and searching for IAPT. A first assessment, mostly by phone, will give your counsellor an idea of the best type of therapy for you.

The most effective forms for the majority of anxiety and panic disorders are variations on the theme of [cognitive behavioural therapy \(CBT\)](#). CBT doesn't delve into the past: instead, it focuses on helping you to understand why, and how, the way your thought processes flow can feed anxiety. It helps you become aware of what's going on inside your brain, and challenge unhelpful thought patterns that arise. It's not quick, and you'll have to do 'homework' outside your sessions, learning to be more aware of what you think and feel. But it's well worth it – success rates are high for both anxiety and panic disorders.

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