Panic Disorder

A guide for children, teens, and caregivers



A panic attack is a sudden wave of intense fear with symptoms such as a racing heart, shaking, dizziness, or trouble breathing. Panic disorder involves repeated, unexpected attacks plus ongoing worry or avoidance afterward. Not every child who has a panic attack develops panic disorder. A clinician can assess the symptoms and check for other causes.

Common symptoms

- Racing heart, sweating, or shaking
- Dizziness, nausea, or chest discomfort
- Fast breathing or feeling short of breath
- Feeling unreal or afraid of losing control
- Worry about more attacks or avoiding places

Why does it happen?

The body’s alarm system, family vulnerability, and stress may all contribute. There is no single cause, and panic is not a sign of weakness.

Treatment and outlook

A pediatrician or mental health clinician reviews symptoms and checks for possible medical causes.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) helps children understand panic and safely face feared sensations and situations.

Sometimes medication is considered with specialist guidance. Treatment and follow-up can improve daily life.

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Living with panic disorder

Practical steps between appointments



Home and school

During an attack. Stay nearby, speak calmly, and find a quiet place. Encourage gentle, unforced breathing. Do not use a paper bag.

Between attacks. Keep regular sleep, meals, and activities. Limit caffeine and record when attacks happen and what helped.

Practice together. Follow the CBT plan, praise small steps, and help your child return gradually to safe activities they have been avoiding.

Include school. Share a simple response plan with trusted staff, and help your child return to class after an attack.

When to seek help

Arrange an evaluation. Contact a pediatrician if attacks repeat, or fear of them disrupts school, sleep, or everyday life.

Seek urgent medical care. A first suspected attack or new chest pain, fainting, or breathing trouble needs prompt assessment. Call **911** for severe symptoms.

If medicine is recommended, ask about evidence for your child's age, possible side effects, and follow-up. Do not change a dose without advice. New or different symptoms still need assessment; do not assume every episode is panic.

Get urgent help

For suicidal thoughts or a mental health crisis, call or text **988** in the US. Call **911** for immediate danger or a life-threatening emergency. Children and teens: tell a trusted adult right away.

For your next appointment

When did attacks occur, what did your child feel, and what helped them recover?

Learn more
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Sources and References

1. **Panic Disorder In Children And Adolescents**

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry · Updated 2023-10

https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Panic-Disorder-In-Children-And-Adolescents-050.aspx