Panic attacks and panic disorder in one page

What it is

What is a panic attack?

A panic attack is a sudden rush of intense fear, with strong body feelings like a racing heart and short breath. It builds fast, peaks within minutes and then passes. It feels dangerous, but it is your body's alarm firing with no real danger.

- A panic attack is a sudden surge of intense fear

The signs

What are the symptoms of a panic attack?

A panic attack brings a pounding heart, short breath, chest tightness, sweating, shaking, dizziness and tingling. Most people also feel sudden terror: that they are dying, choking, losing control or going mad. It builds fast and usually eases within half an hour.

How a diagnosis happens

What does the GP check before calling it panic?

A history, an examination and a few blood tests: thyroid, kidney and salt levels, blood count and blood sugar, plus an ECG only with heart symptoms or family history. Outside hospital, Medicare pays 85% of each test's schedule fee.

Treatment

How well does CBT work for panic attacks?

CBT for panic disorder has strong enough evidence that Australia's psychiatry guideline lists it as an evidence-based recommendation, its highest grade of confidence, alongside SSRI and SNRI antidepressants. Weaker approaches like mindfulness, ACT and EMDR do not have that same grade of evidence behind them for panic disorder specifically, so the guideline is honest that CBT is stronger, not guaranteed.

Medication

Which medicines are used for panic?

In Australia, SSRI antidepressants are the first-line medication for panic disorder, with SNRIs named as an alternative first-line option. The clinical guideline also lists cognitive behavioural therapy, delivered face to face or as a guided online course, as an equal starting option. Later steps can include a different antidepressant class or, short term only, a benzodiazepine.

- SSRIs are first-line medication in Australia
- SNRIs are the alternative first choice
- Medication or therapy work about equally

Who diagnoses and who prescribes

Who diagnoses panic disorder in Australia?

A GP can recognise panic disorder and start treatment. A formal diagnosis can come from a GP, psychologist or psychiatrist, using a clinical interview, not a blood test or scan. There's no single test for it: a trained clinician works from your history and symptoms, often ruling out physical causes like heart problems first.

- A GP is often the first contact
- Psychologists and psychiatrists can diagnose panic

What it costs

What does panic treatment cost?

Costs depend on the path you take: a GP visit is often bulk billed, a psychologist usually attracts a gap fee unless the practice bulk bills, and a psychiatrist visit is usually the most expensive appointment. Medicare items exist for all three, medication costs are capped under the PBS, and a public hospital emergency department is free for Medicare card holders.

- Cost depends on the path you take

In danger? Call 000. Lifeline 13 11 14, text 0477 13 11 14, or chat online.

Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467. Free counselling by phone or video, any hour.

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