

# Helping Your Child Manage Panic Attacks

A panic attack can be scary for you and your child. If your child experiences panic attacks, it is important to seek help from your child's health care provider to figure out what is causing them, and what can be done to prevent them. Children can also have panic attacks during sleep.

Panic attacks are usually triggered by intense fear, which can come from many different things in children, including fear of school, being sick, nightmares, or being in certain social situations. Most panic attacks typically last 5–10 minutes.

## How to recognize when your child is having a panic attack

Panic attacks can appear differently in each child, but some symptoms are common. During moments of a panic attack, your child may:

- Feel like his or her heart is beating fast.
- Feel dizzy or faint.
- Feel nauseous or may vomit. He or she may also have diarrhea.
- Tremble or shake.
- Have numbness or tingling in the fingers and hands.
- Feel like he or she cannot breathe, or is breathing very fast.

Other signs of panic attack include:

- Chest pain.
- Sweating and chills.
- A feeling of choking.
- Feeling very hot (having *hot flashes*).
- Fear of losing control.
- Fear of dying.
- Fear of going crazy.
- Fear of having another panic attack.

## What can I do to help my child manage panic attacks?

It is important to seek help from your child's health care provider to determine the cause of the panic attacks.

- Think about getting therapy or counseling to help your child cope with his or her fears.
- Talk with your health care provider about medicines to stop or prevent panic attacks.



In general, if your child is having a panic attack, you may comfort and help him or her by:

- Teaching him or her about panic attacks and helping him or her to understand that a panic attack is a "false alarm."
- Identifying things that distract from his or her fears, and helping him or her to focus on those things when a panic attack strikes. These may include:
  - Using electronic devices.
  - Listening to music.

- Playing a game.
- Talking about something that your child enjoys.
- Changing to a new activity, such as exercising, eating, or bathing.
- Assuring him or her that you understand his or her feelings, and offering to help him or her to get through it. Do not say or do anything that may make your child feel bad about his or her reaction. Remind your child that the panic attack will end, and that he or she will feel better soon.

## **Where to find support**

- Your child's pediatrician or health care provider can recommend resources and child mental health counselors who can support you and your child.
- Your child's teachers and school counselors can also provide ideas to help your child manage panic attacks.

## **Where to find more information**

- Local organizations that offer resources about panic attacks.
- Trusted sources online.
- Mental health organizations, such as:
  - National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI): [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)
  - National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

## **Contact a health care provider if:**

- Your child's panic attacks are causing him or her to miss school or avoid interacting with friends and family.

## **Get help right away if:**

- Your child stops breathing or faints (*loses consciousness*) during a panic attack.

**This symptom may represent a serious problem that is an emergency. Do not wait to see if the symptoms will go away. Get medical help right away. Call your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.).**

## **Summary**

- Panic attacks are usually triggered by intense fear, and they usually last 5–10 minutes.
- Seek help from your child's health care provider to determine the cause of the panic attacks and learn ways to treat them.
- Teach your child that a panic attack is a "false alarm," help to find an activity to shift attention away from fear, and say that the attack will end soon.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.