

What you need to know about chest pain and anxiety

Chest pain is a common symptom of anxiety and panic attacks. Many people say it is the notable feature of their worst episodes. Not all incidents of chest pain are signs of a heart attack. Sometimes these uncomfortable, painful, and frightening symptoms are symptoms of anxiety.

In fact, studies suggest that one out of every four individuals seeking treatment for chest pain is actually suffering from panic disorder.

Symptoms

Anxiety chest pain is frequently described as a sharp, stabbing sensation that starts suddenly, even if the person is inactive. However, the person may be feeling stressed or anxious already before the chest pain begins. Chest pain caused by anxiety or a panic attack typically lasts around 10 minutes, but the other symptoms can last for up to an hour.

Common symptoms of anxiety and panic attacks include:

- dizziness
- feeling faint
- shortness of breath
- trembling
- changes in body temperature
- feeling out of control of the situation
- numbness and sweating in the feet and hands
- chest pain
- heart palpitations

Anxiety chest pain is more common in panic attacks that come on quickly. Chest pain is reported as a symptom in just one out of ten panic attacks that develop slowly.



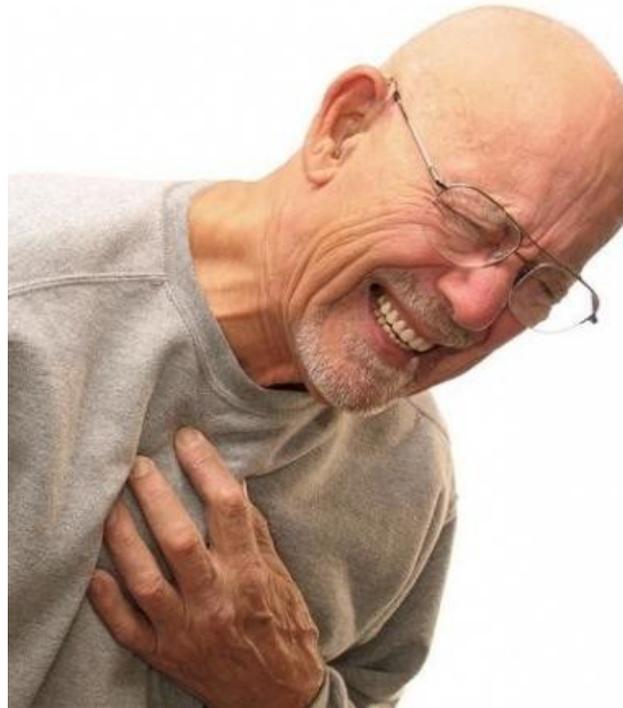
Anxiety chest pain vs. heart conditions

While there are similarities between anxiety chest pain and pain due to heart conditions, there are some significant differences. Anxiety chest pain most often develops when the individual is at rest, while heart attack pain most often develops when the person is active.

Pain from a heart attack frequently travels from the chest to other parts of the body, such as the jaw, shoulders, and arms, but chest pain caused by anxiety remains in the chest.

Anxiety chest pain tends to develop quickly and then fade somewhat rapidly, often within 10 minutes, but heart condition pain starts slowly and gradually increases. Anxiety chest pain may also feel sharper than the pain caused by a heart attack, which people often describe as a squeezing, heavy pressure.

While panic disorders are more common in women, heart attacks are more common in men.



Causes

Anxiety chest pain can be caused by mechanisms that are not related to the cardiac system, mechanisms that are related to the cardiac systems, or by a combination of both.

Mechanisms which are not connected to the cardiac system but can still cause chest pains include:

- **Hyperventilating.** Rapid breathing can lead to low carbon dioxide levels in the blood, causing lightheadedness and tingling in the extremities
- **Esophageal dysmotility.** This condition develops when contractions in the esophagus become irregular.

Panic attacks can also produce physical reactions in the cardiac system that result in chest pain. These include:

- coronary artery spasms
- increased oxygen demand in the heart
- increased blood pressure
- increased resistance of small blood vessels in the heart
- increased heart rate

People who experience anxiety may also have heart disease or cardiac issues that can be exacerbated by a panic attack.

Treatment

Professional help can make a huge difference in the lives of individuals who experience panic attacks and anxiety. If left untreated, these conditions can limit a person's quality of life.

However, medications and cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) have proven to be effective at treating panic disorders in many instances.

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) teaches a person to restructure their thoughts and

identify and avoid specific anxiety triggers. This type of therapy can help individuals reduce and manage the symptoms of panic disorder without using medication.

There are also steps a person can take at home to manage and reduce anxiety symptoms, including chest pain.

The following practices are recommended to help people cope with a panic attack:

- **Safe shelter:** A person should find a secure and comfortable place if possible and consider pulling over if driving.
- **Deep breathing:** Steady, deep breathing can help reduce symptoms of anxiety and prevent them from getting worse.
- **Remember it is temporary:** While experiencing chest pain, focus on the fact that these symptoms should last no more than a few minutes.
- **Try to stay positive:** Focusing on peaceful or positive images may help people reduce the severity of their symptoms during a panic attack.
- **Count:** Counting to 10 or 20 and then repeating can help individuals focus during a panic attack.
- **Rate the attack:** Some people find that reviewing their general state of mind during a panic attack and giving it a score on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being most severe and 1 being a barely noticeable sensation, can help them manage their anxiety.

Also, there are some lifestyle changes a person can make to reduce their risk of symptoms:

- exercise regularly
- get enough sleep
- avoid caffeine, alcohol, and smoking
- avoid foods high in refined sugar



When to see a doctor

Chest pain and heart palpitations can be troubling and potentially serious symptoms. The challenge in dealing with them effectively is to determine whether they are anxiety chest pains or signs of a heart problem.

People experiencing chest pain should see a doctor for evaluation. Both panic disorders and cardiovascular problems are treatable conditions, so getting diagnosed by a doctor will help ensure that individuals receive appropriate treatment.

By Danielle Dresden