Panic disorder with agoraphobia

Definition

Panic disorder with agoraphobia is an anxiety disorder in which there are repeated attacks of intense fear and anxiety, and a fear of being in places where escape might be difficult, or where help might not be available.

Agoraphobia usually involves fear of crowds, bridges, or of being outside alone.

This article discusses panic disorder with agoraphobia.

Causes

The exact causes of panic disorder and agoraphobia are unknown. Because panic attacks often occur in areas or situations where they have happened in the past, panic may be a learned behavior. Agoraphobia sometimes occurs when a person has had a panic attack and begins to fear situations that might lead to another panic attack.

Anyone can develop a panic disorder, but it usually starts around age 25. Panic disorder is more common in women than men.

Symptoms

Panic attacks involve short periods of intense anxiety symptoms, which peak within 10 minutes. Panic attack symptoms can include:

- Chest pain or discomfort
- Choking
- Dizziness or faintness
- Fear of being out of control
- Fear of dying
- Fear of "going crazy"
- Hot flashes or chills
- Nausea or other stomach distress
- Numbness or tingling
- Racing heart
- Shortness of breath
- Sweating
- Trembling

Agoraphobia is considered to be present when places or situations are being avoided. People with agoraphobia generally do not feel safe in public places. Their fear is worse when the place is crowded. Symptoms of agoraphobia include:

- Becoming housebound for prolonged periods of time
- Dependence on others
- Fear of being alone
- Fear of being in places where escape might be difficult
- Fear of losing control in a public place
- Feelings of detachment or estrangement from others
- Feelings of helplessness
- Feeling that the body is unreal
- Feeling that the environment is unreal
Unusual temper or agitation

Treatment

The goal of treatment is to help you feel and function better. The success of treatment usually depends in part on how severe the agoraphobia is.

The standard treatment approach combines cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) with an antidepressant medication.

- Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are usually the first choice of antidepressant.
- Serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs) are another choice. Other antidepressants and some anti-seizure drugs may be used for more severe cases.
- Other anti-anxiety medications may also be prescribed. For example, your health care provider may recommend benzodiazepines when antidepressants don't help or before they take effect.

CBT involves 10 to 20 visits with a mental health professional over a number of weeks. CBT helps you change the thoughts that cause your condition. It may involve:

- Gaining understanding and control of distorted feelings or views of stressful events or situations
- Learning to recognize and replace panic-causing thoughts
- Learning stress management and relaxation techniques
- Systematic desensitization and exposure therapy, in which you are asked to relax, then imagine the things that cause the anxiety, working from the least fearful to the most fearful.

Gradually exposing the patient to the real-life situation that causes the fear has also helped some people overcome their fears.

A healthy lifestyle that includes exercise, enough rest, and good nutrition can also help be helpful.

Outlook (Prognosis)

Most patients can get better with medications or behavioral therapy. However, without early and effective help, the disorder may become more difficult to treat.

Possible Complications

- Some people may abuse alcohol or other drugs while trying to self-medicate.
- Some people may be unable to function at work or in social situations.
- Some people may feel isolated, lonely, depressed, or suicidal.

When to Contact a Medical Professional

Call for an appointment with your health care provider if you have symptoms of panic attacks or agoraphobia.

Prevention

Early treatment of panic disorder can often prevent agoraphobia.
For more information, visit the Franciscan Health Library at www.FHSHealth.org/Health_Education.aspx