

# Panic attack or heart attack? Here's how to tell the difference

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A heart attack and a panic attack share many similar symptoms, so it's crucial to determine which one it is, experts say.

Chest pain, racing [heart](#), shortness of breath and sweating can occur with both, but only a [heart attack](#) can be fatal, according to a team at Penn State Health.

A heart attack occurs when a blockage in an artery restricts [blood flow](#) to the [heart muscle](#). Symptoms continue until a person gets emergency medical treatment. In a [panic](#) attack, symptoms may last 20 minutes and then go away.

However, only a health professional can confirm a heart attack or a panic attack, so any of the common symptoms should be taken seriously, the experts said.

Men 45 and older and women 55 and older are at higher risk for heart attack than younger men and women. Others at high risk include people with

high blood cholesterol and triglyceride levels, high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, metabolic syndrome or a family history of heart attack.

"If a young person with no risk factors experiences [chest pain](#), the likelihood of it being a heart attack is very low," Dr. Rajesh Dave, an interventional cardiologist at Penn State Health Holy Spirit Medical Center, said in a Penn State news release.

"But chest pain in a 50-year-old man who's a long-time smoker with a 20-year history of diabetes most likely signals a heart attack and needs urgent medical care," Dave added.

Stress and anxiety are the main risk factors for [panic attacks](#), but anxiety can also be associated with a heart attack.

Heart attack patients often have some symptoms in the days or weeks before the attack, and heart attacks most often occur during physical activity. Panic attacks typically happen when a person is resting and can be caused by an anxiety trigger, such as receiving bad news.

People having a panic attack should sit in a calm, dark place and take deep breaths to help slow their heart rate.

Dr. Michael Farbaniec, a cardiologist at Penn State Health Milton S. Hershey Medical Center, said, "If you can't tell whether it's a panic or heart attack—or just want to be sure—call 911 and get seen right away."

You can reduce your heart attack risk by eating a heart-healthy diet and getting regular exercise, Dave said. Panic attacks can be prevented through stress-lowering techniques such as meditation and yoga.

"And quitting smoking will reduce your risk for both panic and heart attacks," Dave advised.

**More information:** The U.S. National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute has more on [heart attack](#).

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