

# Is It a Heart Attack or a Panic Attack?

Both heart attacks and panic attacks can cause chest pain, a racing heart, and a feeling that something is very wrong. This document helps you understand the difference — and when to tell patients to call 999 immediately.

**🚨 CALL 999 IMMEDIATELY IF THE PATIENT HAS ANY OF THESE:**  
 Crushing, tight, or heavy chest pain · Pain spreading to arm (especially left), jaw, neck, or back · Sudden sweating · Nausea or vomiting with chest pain · Feeling faint or collapsing · Breathlessness not improving with rest · Pale, grey, or clammy skin · **Symptoms lasting more than 15 minutes — do NOT wait**

## Comparing Heart Attacks and Panic Attacks

Feature	Heart Attack	Panic Attack
<b>Chest pain</b>	Tight, crushing, heavy — like a vice or elephant on chest	Sharp, stabbing, or tight — often comes and goes quickly
<b>Spreads?</b>	Often to arm (left), jaw, neck, back	Stays in chest; does not spread to arm or jaw
<b>Better with rest?</b>	No — pain continues even at rest	Often yes — sitting quietly and breathing slowly can help
<b>Duration</b>	Lasts more than 15 minutes; does not go away on its own	Usually peaks within 10 minutes, then improves
<b>Other symptoms</b>	Sweating, nausea, dizziness, grey skin, breathlessness	Tingling in hands, dizziness, breathlessness, feeling of unreality
<b>What helps?</b>	Call 999; chew aspirin 300mg if not allergic; rest	Calm breathing; grounding; reassurance

## What Is a Panic Attack?

### *What to say to patients*

A panic attack is a sudden surge of intense fear triggered by the body's "fight or flight" response — a flood of adrenaline, even when no real danger is present. This is completely involuntary and is **not** a sign of weakness or mental illness.

Panic attacks are common - they affect **1 in 10 people** at some point in their lives. They are not dangerous and will not cause a heart attack — although they feel frightening at the time.

## Calm Breathing Technique

01

### Breathe IN

Slowly through your nose, counting to **4**

02

### HOLD

Hold your breath, counting to **2**

03

### Breathe OUT

Slowly through your mouth, counting to **6**

04

### Repeat

For 5–10 minutes; focus on the physical sensation of breathing — let thoughts pass

## Ask patients to see a GP if

- They have had more than one panic attack and worry it will happen again
- Panic attacks are affecting their daily life, work, or relationships
- They are avoiding situations for fear of having a panic attack
- They are unsure whether what you experienced was a panic attack or a cardiac problem
- They have chest pain that is new or different from your usual pattern

**⚠️ Important: TELL PATIENTS:** "If you are ever unsure whether you are having a heart attack or a panic attack, **treat it as a heart attack and call 999 immediately.** It is always better to seek help and be reassured than to wait and take a risk. "