

Panic disorder: frightening but treatable

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A U.S. study suggests panic disorder is a fairly common condition that can cause frightening symptoms, but yet is relatively easy to treat.

A University of Washington psychiatrist says although panic disorder can be difficult to diagnose, it can usually be resolved within two months.

The review of recent clinical research on panic disorder was conducted by Dr. Wayne Katon, professor and vice-chairman of psychiatry at the UW School of Medicine.

Katon found between 3 percent and 8 percent of patients visiting their primary-care physicians suffered from panic disorder, often resulting from major stress-inducing factors in their lives.

Panic disorder can cause symptoms such as chest and abdominal pain, a pounding or irregular heartbeat, and shortness of breath. Such alarming symptoms can often lead patients to be screened for serious ailments, such as heart attack.

"They typically go through many medical tests before their physicians accurately diagnose them," said Katon. "Panic disorder is definitely diagnosable and treatable -- people can usually be cured in four to eight weeks with either antidepressant medication or behavioral therapy, or a combination of the two."

He details his study in the current issue of the New England Journal of

Medicine.

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