

Nightmares and Night Terrors

Nightmares are very common in children. Your child awakens suddenly, scared by a “bad dream.” Reassure your child by reminding him or her that the dream wasn’t real and that everything is all right. Night terrors are less common but also usually are harmless. Your child suddenly screams, often without waking up. Afterward, he or she doesn’t remember the event.

What are nightmares and night terrors?

Nightmares are just bad dreams—everyone has them now and then. Nightmares may seem very real, especially to younger children. Just telling your child that the nightmare was “just a dream” and that he or she is safe and protected may calm him or her down enough to return to sleep.

Night terrors, sometimes called sleep terrors, are different. Your child cries out in the middle of the night as if terrified. However, he or she does not seem very responsive and may not even wake up. When your child finally does wake up, he or she doesn’t remember any bad dream.

Both nightmares and night terrors might be helped by providing a relaxing bedtime routine. If these or other sleep problems become a frequent event, be sure to discuss them with your child’s doctor.

What do they look like?

Nightmares:

- Scary or vivid dreams that cause your child to awaken suddenly.
- Most common around ages 3 to 5 but can occur in older children.
- Most commonly occur very early in the morning (4:00 to 6:00 a.m.), when your child is sleeping relatively lightly. This kind of sleep is called rapid-eye movement (REM) sleep. However, nightmares can occur at other times.
- Your child will probably recall the dream very clearly. The dream may involve something disturbing experienced that day. Your child may have the same dream repeatedly.
- Because nightmares are so scary, it may be difficult for your child to settle down and go back to sleep.

Night terrors:

- Your child suddenly screams and sits up in bed. He or she may seem very agitated—sweating, heart racing, pupils wide.

- Even though his or her eyes are open, your child may actually still be asleep. It may be several minutes before he or she finally wakes up.
- When your child does awaken, he or she doesn’t remember any bad dream. As a result, getting back to sleep after night terrors may be less difficult than after than nightmares.
- These episodes are most common in preschool and older children.

Sleepwalking occurs when your child gets out of bed and moves around, even though he or she is still asleep.

What causes nightmares and night terrors?

- Occasional nightmares are normal. Night terrors are less common, but they still occur in many children. Night terrors may run in families.
- Usually there is no specific cause. Nightmares are often related to something your child experienced during the day. Scary movies or TV shows commonly cause nightmares.
- Certain medications may lead to nightmares.
- If nightmares or night terrors occur frequently, they may result from something that’s bothering your child. Be sure to discuss this with your doctor.

How can nightmares and night terrors be prevented?

- Having a stable, relaxing bedtime routine may be helpful. Put your child to bed around the same time every night. Don’t let him or her get overtired. Allow some time for the excitement of the day to wind down before bedtime.
- Don’t let your child see movies or TV shows that are scary or violent.
- Nightmares sometimes reflect a problem or worry in your child’s life. If you can figure out the source of the worry, it may help to talk to your child about it.

What can be done about nightmares and night terrors?

- Nightmares and night terrors rarely signal a serious problem. Usually no special treatment is needed, except for comforting your child.
- If nightmares or night terrors persist or are very frequent, call your doctor’s office. Rarely, they are a sign of some problem affecting your child’s life.

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Nightmares:

- Hug and comfort your child. Let him or her talk about the bad dream.
- Reassure your child it was just a dream. Point out familiar things in the bedroom. Remind your child that you are nearby and he or she is safe and protected.
- Try to distract your child by talking about other things—maybe something fun that’s coming up the next day. It may take a little while before your child is able to stop thinking about the bad dream.
- It’s best not to let the child stay up or sleep in your bed. If you do, it may be harder to get him or her back to bed after the next bad dream.

Night terrors:

- Don’t panic! Night terrors can be pretty alarming for parents, but they are usually harmless to the child.
- Attempt to wake your child gently. He or she may not respond, at least at first.
- When your child does awaken, he or she will probably remember little or nothing about the event. It proba-

bly won’t be difficult to get him or her to go back to sleep.

Sleepwalking:

- Like night terrors, sleepwalking is usually harmless. The problem is that your child may be injured when he or she gets out of bed while still asleep. You may need to put some safety measures in place to prevent such injuries. For example, you may have to put a gate in the doorway to your child’s room, especially if there are stairs.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if:

- Nightmares or night terrors are a frequent or persistent problem.
- Night terrors or frequent nightmares occur in an older child or adolescent.
- Nightmares or night terrors appear related to some specific traumatic event in your child’s life or if they seem to be related to medications he or she is taking.