

# NIGHT TERRORS

## What are night terrors?

Night terrors are an inherited disorder in which a child tends to have dreams during deep sleep from which it is difficult to awaken. They occur in 2% of children and usually are not caused by psychological stress. Getting overtired can trigger night terrors. Night terrors usually occur in children 1 to 8 years old.

A night terror usually begins 1 to 2 hours after going to sleep and lasts from 10 to 30 minutes. During a night terror, your child may:

- Be agitated and restless but cannot be awakened or comforted
- Sit up or run helplessly about, possibly screaming or talking wildly
- Not appear to realize you are there even though his or her eyes are wide open and staring
- Mistake objects or persons in the room for dangers

In the morning, your child cannot remember what happened.

## How long do they last?

Night terrors usually occur within 2 hours of bedtime. Night terrors are harmless and each episode will end of its own accord in deep sleep. The problem usually disappears by age 12 or sooner

## How can I help my child?

- **Try to help your child return to normal sleep**  
Your goal is to help your child go from agitated sleep to a calm sleep. You won't be able to awaken your child, so don't try to. Turn on the lights so that your child is less confused by shadows. Make soothing comments such as, "You are all right. You are home in your own bed. You can rest now." Speak calmly and repetitively. Such comments are usually better than silence and may help your child refocus. Some children like to have their hand held during this time, but most will pull away. Hold your child only if it seems to help your child feel better.

There is no way to abruptly shorten the episodes. Shaking or shouting at your child will just cause the child to become more agitated and will prolong the attack.

- **Protect your child against injury**  
During a night terror, a child can fall down a stairway, run into a wall, or break a window. Try to gently direct your child back to bed.
- **Prepare baby sitters for these episodes**  
Explain to people who care for your child what a night terror is and what to do if one happens. Understanding this will prevent them from overreacting if your child has a night terror.

## How can I help prevent night terrors?

- **Keep your child from becoming overtired**  
Sleep deprivation is the most common trigger for night terrors. For preschoolers, restore the afternoon nap. If your child refuses the nap, encourage a one-hour "quiet time." Also avoid late bedtimes because they may trigger a night terror. If your child needs to be awakened in the morning, that means he needs an

earlier bedtime. Move lights out time to 15 minutes earlier each night until your child can self-awaken in the morning.

- Use prompted awakenings for frequent night terrors  
If your child has frequent night terrors, Dr. B. Lask of London has found a new way to eliminate this distressing sleep pattern in 90% of children. For several nights, note how many minutes elapse from the time your child falls asleep to the onset of the night terror. Then begin awakening your child every night 15 minutes before the expected time of the night terror. Remind your child to “wake up fast.” Keep your child fully awake and out of bed for 5 minutes. Continue these prompted awakenings for 7 nights in a row. If the night terrors return when you stop awakening your child, repeat this seven-night training program.

### **When should I call my child’s health care provider?**

Call during office hours if:

- Any drooling, jerking, or stiffening occurs
- The episodes occur two or more times per week after the seven prompted awakenings
- Episodes last longer than 30 minutes
- Your child does something dangerous during an episode
- Episodes occur during the second half of the night
- Your child has several daytime fears
- You feel family stress may be a factor
- You have other questions or concerns

# NIGHTMARES

## What is a nightmare?

Nightmares are scary dreams that awaken a child. Occasional bad dreams are normal at all ages after about 6 months of age. When infants have a nightmare, they cry and scream until someone comes to them. When preschoolers have a nightmare, they usually cry and run into their parents' bedroom. Older children begin to understand what a nightmare is and put themselves back to sleep without waking their parents.

## What is the cause?

Everyone dreams 4 or 5 times each night. Some dreams are good, some are bad. Dreams help the mind process complicated events or information. The content of nightmares usually relates to developmental challenges such as:

- Toddlers have nightmares about separation from their parents
- Preschoolers have nightmares about death or real dangers
- School-age children have nightmares about death or real dangers

Frequent nightmares may be caused by violent TV shows or movies.

## How can I help my child?

- **Reassurance and cuddle your child**  
Explain to your child that she was having a bad dream. Sit on the bed until your child is calm. Offer to leave the bedroom door open (never close the door on a fearful child). Provide a nightlight, especially if your child has fears of the dark. Most children return to sleep fairly quickly.
- **Help your child talk about the bad dreams during the day**  
Your child may not remember what the dream was about unless you can remind him of something he said about it when he woke up. If your child was dreaming about falling or being chased, reassure him that lots of children dream about that. If your child has the same bad dream over and over again, help him imagine a good ending to the bad dream. Encourage your child to use a strong person or a magic weapon to help him overcome the bad person or event in the dream. You may want to help your child draw pictures or write stories about the new happier ending for the dream. Working through a bad fear often takes several conversations about it.
- **Protect your child against frightening movies and TV shows**  
For many children, violent shows or horror movies cause bedtime fears and nightmares. These fears can persist for months or years. Absolutely forbid these movies before 13 years of age. Between 13 and 17 years, the maturity and sensitivity of your child must be considered carefully in deciding when he is ready to deal with the uncut versions of R-rated movies. Be vigilant about slumber parties or Halloween parties. Tell your child to call you if the family he is visiting is showing scary movies.

## When should I call my child's health care provider?

Call during office hours if:

- The nightmares become worse
- The nightmares are not minimal after using this approach for 2 weeks
- The fear interferes with daytime activities
- Your child has several fears
- You have other questions or concerns