

NIGHT TERRORS & NIGHTMARES

Night Terrors:

A child with night terrors is frightened but cannot be awakened or comforted easily. The child is agitated and may sit up or run helplessly about, possibly screaming or talking wildly. The child may not appear to realize that the parent is there. Although the eyes are wide open and staring, the child looks right through you. The child may mistake objects or persons in the room for dangers. The episode lasts from 10 to 30 minutes. Afterwards the child cannot remember the episode (amnesia). The child is usually 1 to 8 years old.

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 are usually not caused by psychological stress. Night terrors are harmless and each episode will end on its own. The problem will disappear by age 12 or sooner.

Suggestions for night terrors

Try to calm your child. Your goal is to help your child return to a calm sleep. You probably won't be able to awaken your child and need not do so. Turn on the lights so that your child is less confused by the shadows. Make soothing comments such as, "You are all right. You are home in your own bed. You can rest now." Speak slowly and repetitively. Such comments are usually better than silence. Some children like to have their hand held during this time, but some will pull away. Hold your child only if it seems to help your child feel better. There is no way to abruptly shorten the episode. Shaking or shouting at your child will just cause the child to be more agitated and will prolong the attack.

Protect your child against injury. During a night terror, a child can fall down a stairway or run into a wall. Try to gently direct your child back to bed. Prepare babysitters or adults who supervise an overnight 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 the child has a night terror.

If your child has frequent night terrors, try this way to change this distressing sleep pattern. For several nights, note how many minutes elapse from falling asleep to the onset of the night terror. Then awaken your child 15 minutes before the expected time. Keep your child awake for 5 minutes. Carry out these prompted awakenings for 7 consecutive nights. If the night terrors return, repeat this 7 night program. **GOOD LUCK!**

Nightmares:

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 parent's bedroom. Older children begin to understand what a nightmare is and put themselves back to sleep without bothering their parents.

Dreams help the mind process complicated happenings or information. The content of nightmares usually relates to developmental challenges: toddlers have nightmares about separation from their parents; preschoolers, about monsters or the dark; and school-age children, about death or real dangers. Frequent nightmares may be caused by violent TV shows or movies.

Suggestions for nightmares

Reassure and cuddle your child. Explain to your child that she was having a bad dream. Sit on the bed until your child is calm. Most children return to sleep fairly quickly.

Offer to leave the bedroom door open and to provide a night-light. Help your child talk about the bad dreams during the day. Your child probably won't remember what the dream was about unless you can remind him of something he said about it when he woke up. 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 parts in the dream. You may want to help your child draw pictures of the new ending for the dream.

Avoid R-rated movies and violent parts of TV news until the child is old enough to handle the content.. And, of course, get rid of any TV in the child's bedroom. **GOOD LUCK!**

Rev. 3/2021 Nightterrors-Nightmares