

Sleep Terrors

WHAT ARE SLEEP TERRORS?

Sleep terrors, also called “night terrors,” are sleep behaviors that most often occur in young children. They are related to sleepwalking. A child having a sleep terror will often cry out or scream and appears very agitated, frightened, and even panicked. During the episode, your child may appear confused and dazed, may mumble or give inappropriate answers to questions, and may be clumsy. Your child may flail around, push you away, or behave in other strange ways. As disturbing and frightening as these events appear, children having them usually are totally unaware of what they are doing. Although your child may appear to be awake, she is actually *deeply asleep*. In fact, sleep terrors are much worse to watch than to experience and can understandably be very distressing for parents.

Although they may seem much longer to a worried parent, sleep terrors typically last for 5 to 10 minutes, occasionally longer. Because they are asleep during the episode, children have no memory of these events. The hardest part for parents is that most children avoid being comforted during the episodes. They may even become more agitated if you talk to them and try to calm them down.

Sleep terrors are not nightmares, and your child is not dreaming during these events. Thus, a sleep terror is actually much less upsetting for a child than a typical nightmare or bad dream. It is important to understand that sleep terrors are also not a sign of psychological problems or the result of a traumatic event. Nor do they cause any psychological harm to a child.

Confusional arousals are another sleep behavior similar to sleepwalking and sleep terrors. They are also characterized by agitation, disorientation, and crying or moaning (“no, no!”). Sometimes a confusional arousal will involve thrashing around in bed. Confusional arousals start more gradually from sleep compared to sleep terrors. They typically last 5 to 15 minutes, but can last several hours.

WHAT CAUSES SLEEP TERRORS?

Sleep terrors usually occur during the deepest stage of sleep (also called “slow-wave sleep”). Thus, it is more likely to occur within the first 1 to 2 hours after falling asleep, since that is when deep sleep is most likely to occur. Sleep terrors are also more common in younger children, because they have much more deep sleep than do teenagers or adults. Most children outgrow sleep terrors by adolescence. Furthermore, sleep terrors often run in families and children who have sleep terrors are also more likely to sleepwalk and vice versa.

Sleep terrors are more likely to happen when your child doesn’t get enough sleep. This is because the body gets more deep sleep after not getting enough sleep. And the more deep sleep, the more likely a sleep terror will occur. Anything that results in not getting enough sleep, such as when a child first starts giving up her nap or with a change in his schedule (for example, starting school) may trigger a sleep terror in a child who is prone to them. The likelihood of sleep terrors is also increased by anything that interrupts or disrupts sleep. These include:

- An irregular sleep schedule (going to bed and getting up at different times from one day to the next)

- Another sleep disorder, such as snoring or sleep apnea
- Fever, illness
- Some medications
- Sleeping with a full bladder
- Sleeping in a different environment, such as at a friend's or grandparent's home
- Sleeping in a noisy environment
- Stress

HOW SHOULD YOU RESPOND TO YOUR CHILD'S SLEEP TERRORS?

- **Keep your child safe:** The most important thing that you can do if your child has sleep terrors is to keep her safe. Although many children with sleep terrors do not get out of bed, many also sleepwalk and can injure themselves. Make sure that all outside doors are secure. Ensure that windows, especially second story or higher, do not open wide enough that your child can jump out of them. An alarm, such as a simple bell hung on the door, can signal you when your child is up and about, and help to ensure that she does not leave the house. Some parents attach a screen or a gate to their child's bedroom door or at the top of stairs. Finally, remove things that are in the way. If your child may walk or run around during a sleep terror, clear away anything that he can step on or trip over.
- **Don't wake your child:** Although not harmful to your child, nothing is gained by trying to wake your child during a sleep terror. It may even make your child more agitated.
- **Try not to interfere:** The normal response of parents is to try and comfort their child during one of these episodes. Try to resist doing this, as most children will just become more agitated. It is best to walk quietly into your child's room, stand nearby, and let the episode run its course. The sleep terror is likely to end more quickly if you don't interfere. If your child has gotten out of bed, guide her gently back to bed, but if she resists, let her be.
- **Make sure your child is getting enough sleep:** If your child seems tired in the morning, she may not be getting enough sleep (sleep terrors themselves do not make children tired, because they are asleep during the episodes). Since sleep terrors are much more likely to happen when your child does not get enough sleep, you may need to move bedtime earlier.
- **Maintain a regular sleep schedule:** Sleep terrors are more likely to happen on nights when your child goes to sleep at a different time (or place) than usual. If your child is having a sleep-over at someone else's home, let the parents know that your child has sleep terrors.
- **Look for signs of other sleep problems:** If your child takes a long time to fall asleep, frequently wakes during the night, snores, or otherwise doesn't get a good night's sleep, she may be more likely to have sleep terrors. Addressing these sleep issues often decreases or even eliminates sleep terrors.
- **Don't discuss sleep terrors the next day:** The morning after an event, do not make a point of discussing the episode with your child unless she brings it up. Making a big deal about the event may worry or embarrass her. If she does raise a concern, reassure her that this is a normal sleep behavior in children, it is not harmful, and that you will keep her safe.
- **Avoid caffeine:** Caffeine can disrupt your child's sleep, and increase the likelihood of a sleep terror.
- **Additional treatment:** In most cases, sleep terrors require no specific treatment. However, in severe cases, when these behaviors involve injury, violence, or serious disruption to the family, treatment may be necessary. Treatment may include medication or behavior modification techniques. Be sure to speak to your child's doctor if your child has frequent or severe sleep terrors or if you are concerned.