

NIGHTMARES AND NIGHT TERRORS

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

NIGHTMARES

Nightmares are frightening dreams that many children experience around once a week. They occur during sleep when you are dreaming. Nightmares are far more common than night terrors.

What does a nightmare look like?

Most nightmares happen late in the night, often many hours after the child has gone to bed. This is because we are more likely to dream during the REM stage of sleep. REM sleep is more prominent in the second half of the night, which is when most nightmares occur.

A child might cry after they wake up from a nightmare, and will often come to you for comfort and welcome any hugs from you. Unlike night terrors, it is common for a child to have more than one nightmare per night. It is rare that children will get up and walk around when experiencing a nightmare. They might be able to have a conversation with you about the nightmare they had and they will remember the nightmare in the morning.

Children experiencing a nightmare are typically easy to wake up, and although the child may be very distressed at first, parents are eventually able to calm them down.



NIGHT TERRORS

Night terrors often start with a scream and are a very intense awakening. Night terrors are not a dream, but the child will not be fully aware of their surroundings during the night terror. A child experiencing a night terror is somewhere between being asleep and awake.

What does a night terror look like?

Night terrors usually occur earlier in the night than nightmares. Night terrors happen during deep sleep. Most deep sleep occurs in the first few hours of falling asleep, meaning night terrors are more likely to happen 3-4 hours after putting your child to bed.

Children often cry or scream and seem extremely afraid and confused. Children are often inconsolable during a terror, and may even push you away when you try to hug or touch them. They often involve the child tossing and thrashing about and usually last for about 5 to 10 minutes, but can last up to around 30 minutes. The child will also probably not remember it in the morning.

Children experiencing a night terror are very hard to wake up properly and although your child may talk, act and have open eyes as if they are awake, they won't really respond to you. Your child may also get up and walk around. There is fortunately usually only one terror per night.





HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD?

MY CHILD HAS NIGHT TERRORS, WHAT CAN I DO?

Importantly, the child will have little to no memory of the terror when they wake up in the morning. It is best not to try and wake the child during the terror as this can lead to confusion and distress for the child which they will then remember in the morning.

The only real danger with night terrors is how a child might injure themselves when moving about whilst not fully conscious. It is recommended that parents check that children are not in any physical danger and try to guide them back to bed. This can include things like...

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- picking things up off the floor,
 - putting guards on sharp corners,
 - making sure windows are closed at night,
 - using sleeping bags to stop wandering,
 - putting gates on stairs and
 - not using bunk beds for your child.



Most children will grow out of night terrors and never require any treatment. Night terrors can be distressing for a parent, but they are a common part of growing up, occurring in around 35% of children, and aren't typically a cause for concern.

Night terrors do not have long-term effects on children.

Practices such as regular bedtimes, night-time routines and ensuring your child is getting enough sleep can also help. You can read more about sleep hygiene practices like this here <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/sleep-tips-for-children>

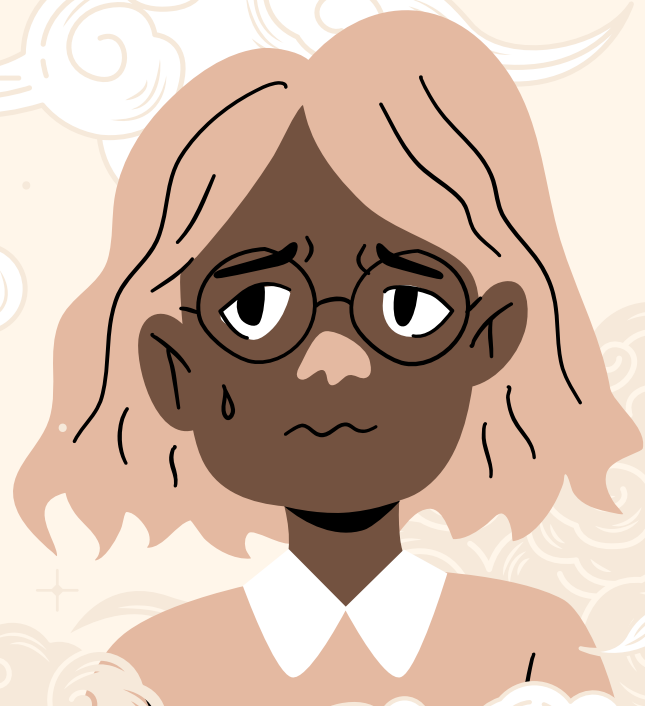
If your child is experiencing night terrors at several times a week or more at around the same times every night, you can consider trying out the technique of Scheduled Awakening, which you can read more about here https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/supplemental/pediatric-sleep-problems/Scheduled_Awakening_for_Disorders_of_Arousal.pdf

You can also reach out to your GP for more information and guidance on your child's sleep challenges.



HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD?

MY CHILD HAS NIGHTMARES, WHAT CAN I DO?



As a parent, it is best for you to soothe your child and help them back to sleep. Try not to get angry with the child, and preferably help them re-settle in their own bed. Like night terrors, nightmares are common during childhood.

If you can, have a talk with your child about the nightmare. You can help them create an alternative happy or funny ending to the dream. This can make the nightmare less intense over time. Find out more information about handling nightmares here

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/sleep-children-and-nightmares>

I'M STILL CONCERNED, WHAT'S NEXT?

STILL WORRIED ABOUT THE NIGHT TERRORS OR NIGHTMARES YOUR CHILD EXPERIENCES?

If your child is experiencing more night terrors or nightmares than usual or expected, and/or their ability to function during the day is worse than normal, consider filling in a **Sleep Diary** and bringing it with you to discuss the issue with your child's paediatrician. A Sleep Diary is a way for you to keep track of your child's sleep quality, quantity and habits. Sleep diaries are a great way to get an overall understanding of your child's sleep challenges.

An example of a sleep diary can be found here

https://psychologicalsleepservices.com/uploads/3/5/1/4/35140595/sleep_diary_1atest_-_pdf.pdf

