

# NIGHT TERRORS



A night terror is a sleep disturbance that can be very upsetting to parents. When children have night terrors, they usually scream or cry out and appear to be frightened, as if they're reacting to a nightmare. Children having night terrors may appear very frightened. They may sit up in bed, thrash their arms and legs, and seem terrified.

Night terrors are often more upsetting to parents than they are to the children who have them. When parents try to calm their children during night terrors, they often find that their children do not seem to recognize them and do not respond to them. This is because children having night terrors are still asleep. Their eyes may be wide open, but in fact they are asleep.

Parents often confuse night terrors with nightmares, when in fact they are very different. Night terrors

are less common than nightmares. Unlike nightmares, night terrors take place during very deep sleep and generally occur during the first four hours of sleep. Though they are rare, they most often occur around the ages of four and five, and they usually stop around eight years of age.

Night terrors are not usually considered to be dangerous or to be a cause for concern. It is not presently known why children have night terrors, but they do tend to run in families. They are not believed to be related to stresses or problems in everyday life that children may have. They are usually not upsetting to children, because they don't remember the night terror the next day, and do not wake up while they are having them. Most often the children having night terrors return to quiet sleep within a short period of time.

## What Parents Can Do

**\*Go to your children.** When parents hear their children cry out, they should go to them as quickly as possible. Parents can try to comfort their children by holding them close or by rubbing their backs. Children may not even know their parents are there, and parents may not be able to comfort their children, but

parents will be able to keep their children from hurting themselves. Parents should follow their children's leads. They should comfort their children if they seem to want it, and should let their children be if they don't seem to want comforting.

**\*Stay with your children.** It's important that parents stay nearby until their children resume quiet sleep. Some children get up and walk around during a night terror. If this happens, children can easily get hurt. It's probably a good idea for parents to make sure, before their children go to bed at night, that there is nothing left on the floor that their children can trip over should they get up and walk during the night.

**\*Make sure your children get enough sleep.** Night terrors happen more often when children are very tired.

**\*Don't try to wake your children.** As long as children are not hurting themselves, there is no need for parents to wake them. Parents' attempts to wake their children may prolong the night terror.

**\*Turn on a light.** This will help calm parents down and will be comforting to children should they wake up.

**\*Remain calm.** It's important that parents try to remain calm because their anxiety may frighten their children if they do wake up.

### REMEMBER...

The best thing parents can do for children who are having night terrors is to stay nearby. Parents should be ready to offer comfort, support, and protection from danger. Night terrors are usually over quickly. Although night terrors should not be a cause for concern, parents should consult their children's health care providers if they have any questions or concerns, especially if the night terrors persist and/or become frequent.



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