

Night Terrors

DESCRIPTION

- Your child is frightened but cannot be awakened or comforted.
- Your child is agitated and may sit up or run helplessly about, possibly screaming or talking wildly.
- Your child doesn't appear to realize that you are there. Although your child's eyes are wide open and staring, he looks right through you.
- Your child may mistake objects or persons in the room for dangers.
- The episode lasts from 10 to 30 minutes.
- Your child cannot remember the episode in the morning (amnesia).
- The child is usually 1 to 8 years old.

CAUSE

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 percent of children and usually are not caused by psychological stress. Getting overtired can trigger night terrors, so be sure your child goes to bed at a reasonable time. For younger children, consider having them return to a daily nap.

EXPECTED COURSE

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.

DEALING WITH NIGHT TERRORS

1. **Try to help your child return to a 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 it. Turn on the lights so that your child is less confused by shadows. Make soothing comments such as, "You are alright. 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 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 episode. Shaking or shouting at your child will just cause the child to become more agitated and will prolong the attack.

2. **Protect your child from danger.**
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.

3. **Prepare babysitters or overnight leaders 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.

4. **Try to prevent night terrors with prompted awakenings.**
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 percent of children. For several nights, note how many sleep 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. Keep your child fully awake and out of bed for 5 minutes. Continue these prompted awakenings for seven consecutive nights. If the night terrors return when you stop awakening your child, repeat this seven-night program.

CALL YOUR CHILD'S PHYSICIAN 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.

Written by B.D. Schmitt, M.D., author of "Your Child's Health," Bantam Books.