

Night Terrors

What Are Night Terrors?

A night terror (also called sleep terror) is similar to a nightmare, but is far more dramatic. A child having a night terror wakes up screaming and is impossible to comfort. They don't seem aware that someone is there trying to help them feel better. Eventually the child goes back to sleep and usually won't remember the night terror when they wake.

Night terrors can be alarming to see, but they're not harmful and kids almost always grow out of them.

What Are the Signs & Symptoms of Night Terrors?

A child having a night terror might:

- suddenly sit upright in bed
- act very upset and afraid
- shout out or scream in distress
- have faster breathing and a quicker heartbeat
- be sweating
- thrash around
- get up and run from the bed

After a few minutes, or sometimes longer, the child calms down and goes back to sleep.

What Happens in Night Terrors?

Night terrors usually happen about 2–3 hours after a child falls asleep. This is when the brain is in non-REM (non-rapid eye movement) stages of sleep. The child partly wakes up, and the area of the brain that controls “fight-or-flight” responses becomes overexcited. This makes the child feel panicked and terrified.

Night terrors are most common in kids younger than 13 years old. Because they happen when a child is partially awake, things that disturb sleep can make night terrors more likely (such as obstructive sleep apnea and reflux).

Other things that can make night terrors more likely include:

- not getting enough sleep
- being sick
- taking some types of medicines
- sleeping in a new place or away from home
- anxiety or stress
- having too much caffeine

Night terrors and other sleep disturbances, such as sleepwalking, often run in families.

A child might have a single night terror or several before they stop. Most of the time, night terrors simply go away on their own before the teen years.

How Are Night Terrors Diagnosed?

Doctors usually diagnose night terrors by asking about what happened and doing an exam. Medical tests usually aren't needed.

How Are Night Terrors Treated?

Doctors teach parents what to do when their child has a night terror and how to help prevent them.

Night terrors can be very upsetting for parents, who might feel helpless when they can't comfort their child. But kids are OK and probably won't remember the night terror the next day.

If your child has a night terror, the best way to handle it is to:

- Sit quietly near your child.
- Be sure they don't get hurt by thrashing or running around.
- Wait patiently until your child goes back to sleep, usually within a few minutes.

Don't try to wake your child. This usually doesn't work, and kids who do wake are likely to be confused and upset. They also might take longer to settle down and go back to sleep.

To help prevent night terrors, try to:

- Help your child manage stress.
- Help your child have a bedtime routine that's simple and relaxing.
- Make sure your child gets enough sleep.
- Follow the doctor's treatment recommendations if your child has obstructive sleep apnea or reflux.

If your child has a night terror around the same time every night, you can try waking them up about 15–30 minutes before then to see if that helps prevent it.

When Should I Call the Doctor?

Most kids outgrow night terrors. But talk to your doctor if:

- The night terrors last longer than 30 minutes, happen more than once a week, or prevent your child from getting enough sleep.
- Your child seems very sad, fearful, or stressed during the day.
- Your child has drooling, stiffening, or jerking during the night terror.
- Your child snores, has heartburn, or has frequent burping.

What Else Should I Know?

Understanding night terrors can ease your worry — and help you get a good night's sleep yourself. If you still have concerns, talk to your child's doctor about whether seeing a sleep specialist or other specialist would help.

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