
Sleepwalking

What Is Sleepwalking?

Sleepwalking is very common in kids. Most kids who walk in their sleep only do so occasionally and outgrow it by the teen years.

Kids tend to sleepwalk within an hour or two of falling asleep and may walk around for anywhere from a few seconds to 30 minutes. It's difficult to wake someone up while they're sleepwalking. When awakened, a person may feel groggy and disoriented for a few minutes.

Despite its name, sleepwalking (also called **somnambulism**) involves more than just walking. Sleepwalking behaviors can be:

- harmless — like sitting up
- potentially dangerous — such as wandering outside
- inappropriate — like opening a closet door and peeing inside

No matter what kids do during sleepwalking episodes, though, it's unlikely that they'll remember ever having done it!

Still, some simple steps can keep your young sleepwalker safe while traipsing about.

What Causes Sleepwalking?

Sleepwalking is far more common in kids than in adults. It may run in families, so if you or your partner are or were sleepwalkers, your child may be too.

Things that may bring on a sleepwalking episode include:

- lack of sleep or fatigue
- irregular sleep schedules
- illness or fever
- some medicines
- stress

What Happens During Sleepwalking?

Getting out of bed and walking around while still sleeping is the most obvious sleepwalking symptom. But young sleepwalkers may also:

- talk in their sleep
- be hard to wake up
- seem dazed

- be clumsy
- not respond when spoken to
- sit up in bed and go through repeated motions, such as rubbing their eyes or fussing with their pajamas

Also, sleepwalkers' eyes are open, but they don't see the same way they do when they're awake. Often, they think they're in different rooms of the house or different places altogether.

Sometimes, these other conditions may happen with sleepwalking:

- sleep apnea (brief pauses in breathing while sleeping)
- bedwetting (enuresis)
- night terrors

Is Sleepwalking Harmful?

Sleepwalking itself is not harmful. But sleepwalking can be hazardous because sleepwalking kids aren't awake and may not realize what they're doing, such as walking down stairs or opening windows.

Sleepwalking is not usually a sign that something is emotionally or psychologically wrong with a child. And it doesn't cause any emotional harm. Sleepwalkers probably won't even remember the nighttime stroll.

How to Keep a Sleepwalker Safe

Sleepwalking isn't dangerous by itself. But it's important to take precautions so that your sleepwalking child is less likely to fall down, run into something, walk out the front door, or drive (if your teen is a sleepwalker).

To help keep your sleepwalker out of harm's way:

- Try not to wake a sleepwalker because this might scare your child. Instead, gently guide him or her back to bed.
- Lock the windows and doors, in your child's bedroom and throughout your home, in case your young sleepwalker decides to wander. You may consider extra locks or child safety locks on doors. Keep keys out of reach for kids who are old enough to drive.
- To prevent falls, don't let your sleepwalker sleep in a bunk bed.
- Remove sharp or breakable things from around your child's bed.
- Keep dangerous objects out of reach.
- Remove obstacles from your child's room and throughout your home to prevent a stumble. Get rid of clutter on the floor (in your child's bedroom or playroom).
- Install safety gates outside your child's room and/or at the top of any stairs.

When Should I Call the Doctor?

There's usually no need to treat sleepwalking unless the episodes are:

- very regular
- cause your child to be sleepy during the day

- involve dangerous behaviors

If the sleepwalking happens often, causes problems, or your child hasn't outgrown it by the early teen years, talk to your doctor.

For kids who sleepwalk often, doctors may recommend a treatment called scheduled awakening. This means you will gently wake your child up a little before the usual sleepwalking time, which can help stop sleepwalking. In rare cases, a doctor may prescribe medicine to aid sleep.

What Else Should I Know?

To help prevent sleepwalking episodes:

- Have your child relax at bedtime by listening to soft music or relaxation tapes.
- Establish a regular sleep and nap schedule and stick to it — both nighttime and wake-up time.
- Make your child's bedtime earlier. This can improve excessive sleepiness.
- Don't let kids drink a lot in the evening and be sure they go to the bathroom before going to bed. (A full bladder can contribute to sleepwalking.)
- Avoid caffeine near bedtime.
- Make sure your child's bedroom is quiet, cozy, and comfortable for sleeping. Keep the noise down while kids are trying to sleep (at bedtime and naptime).

The next time you see your nighttime wanderer, don't panic. Just steer your child back to the safety and comfort of his or her bed.

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Date reviewed: September 2023

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