

Introduction

Night terrors happen when a person who is asleep experiences a sudden episode of intense fear. The episode usually lasts between a few seconds and a few minutes.

Night terrors are rare. They happen most often to children, but they also can affect adults. Although night terrors are scary, most people outgrow them.



This reference summary explains night terrors. It discusses the symptoms and causes of the condition. It also covers treatment options.

Night Terrors and Sleep

While we sleep, our brains stay active. Sleep affects our physical and mental health in many ways.

People usually cycle through 5 stages of sleep:

1. Stage 1, or drowsiness.
2. Stage 2, or light sleep.
3. Stage 3, or deep sleep.
4. Stage 4, or slow-wave deep sleep.
5. Rapid eye movement, or REM.

During REM sleep, our breathing becomes more rapid, irregular and shallow. Our eyes jerk rapidly in various directions. Our limb muscles become temporarily paralyzed.

During stage 1, or drowsiness, we drift in and out of sleep. We can be woken up easily. Our eyes move slowly. Muscle activity slows. In stage 2 sleep, eye movement stops and brain waves slow.

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In stages 3 and 4, slow brain waves appear. It is difficult to wake someone during stages 3 and 4. Together, these stages are called deep sleep. There is no eye movement or muscle activity.



People woken up during deep sleep do not adjust immediately. They often feel groggy and confused for several minutes after they wake up. During deep sleep, some people experience sleep disorders. Sleep disorders are common. They include bedwetting, sleepwalking and night terrors.

Night terrors usually happen about 2 to 3 hours after a person falls asleep. This is when sleep changes from the deepest stage of non-REM sleep to lighter REM sleep. This is the stage where dreams happen.

Symptoms

Night terrors, also known as sleep terrors, are not the same as nightmares. The dreamer of a nightmare wakes up from the dream and remembers details. But a person who has a night terror episode stays asleep. Children who have night terrors usually don't remember anything about them the next morning. Adults may remember a dream fragment they had during the night terrors.

During a night terror episode, a person may:

- Get out of bed and run around the house.
- Kick and thrash.
- Scream or yell.

During a night terror episode, a person may also:

- Sit up in bed.
- Stare wide-eyed.
- Sweat, breathe heavily and have a racing pulse.



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A person having night terrors rarely may become violent. They may harm themselves or others. This is more common in adults than children. It may be hard to comfort a person having night terrors or to wake them up.

Night terrors that happen once in a while usually are not a cause for concern. But you should contact a health care provider if night terrors:

- Cause fear of going to sleep.
- Disrupt your sleep or the sleep of others.
- Happen often.
- Lead to dangerous behavior.

Regularly disrupted sleep may cause daytime sleepiness. This can affect a person's ability to focus. It can lead to difficulties at school or work, or problems with everyday tasks.

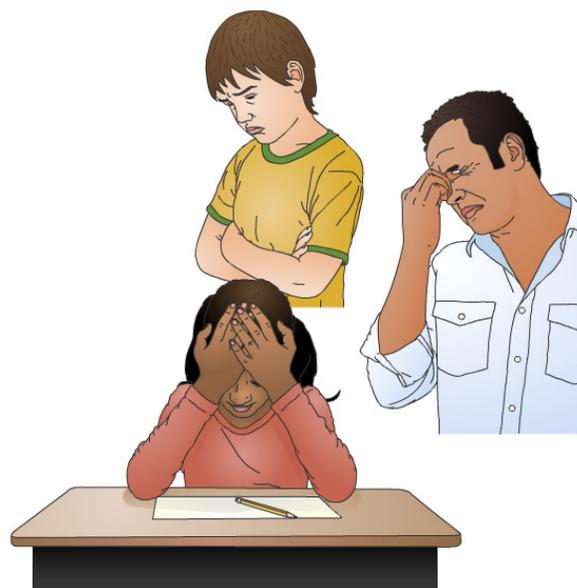
Causes

Night terrors are rare. They can happen to anyone. But they most often affect children between the ages of 4 and 12.

Night terrors may happen if someone is:

- Anxious.
- Fatigued.
- Sleep deprived.
- Stressed.

Sleeping in a place that is unfamiliar or noisy may lead to night terrors. Having a fever may increase the chance of night terrors in children.



Night terrors also are associated with other medical problems that affect sleep. These include:

- Migraines.
- Head injuries.
- Sleep disordered breathing.
- Sleepwalking.

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Sleep disordered breathing is a group of disorders characterized by abnormal breathing patterns during sleep. The most common type is obstructive sleep apnea.

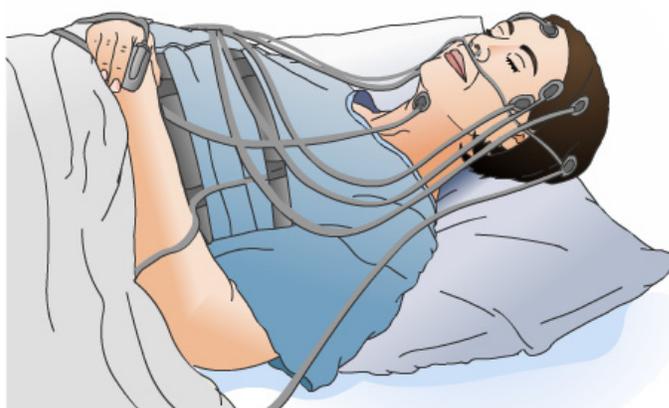
Night terrors tend to run in families. Some adults who have night terrors may have a history of depression or anxiety disorders. But most do not have a mental health condition.

Diagnosis

Night terrors are usually self-diagnosed. But your health care provider may be able to help identify factors that lead to night terror episodes. Your health care provider will perform a physical exam. He or she will ask about your personal and family medical history.

Your health care provider may recommend a sleep study. This is also called a polysomnogram. This test takes place in an overnight sleep lab. During a sleep study, sensors are placed on different parts of your body. They will record your:

- Blood oxygen level.
- Brain waves.
- Breathing.
- Eye movements.
- Heartbeat.
- Limb movements.
- Muscle tension.



Your sleep will also be recorded by a video camera. Based on the results of your sleep study, your health care provider may be able to help you find out the cause of your night terrors.

Treatment

Treatment for night terrors is usually not needed. Children usually grow out of night terrors. During a night terror, you may gently hold your child. Try to help him or her get back into bed. Speak softly and calmly. Do not shake your child or yell at them.

Treatment may be needed if night terrors are caused by another medical or mental health condition. Your health care provider may recommend meeting with a counselor if anxiety or stress are contributing to night terrors.

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Treatment for night terrors may include:

- Cognitive behavior therapy.
- Hypnosis.
- Biofeedback.
- Relaxation therapy.

Cognitive behavior therapy helps a person process their feelings and emotions. Hypnosis is a trance-like state in which a person has heightened focus and concentration. A person who is under hypnosis usually feels calm and relaxed.

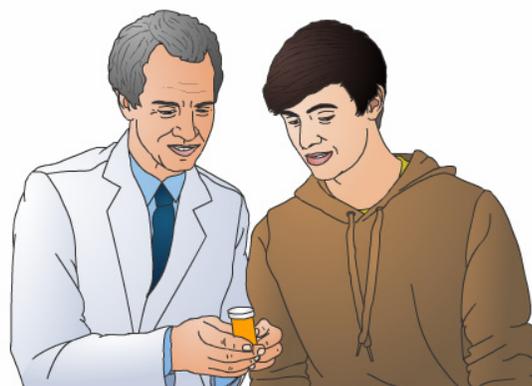
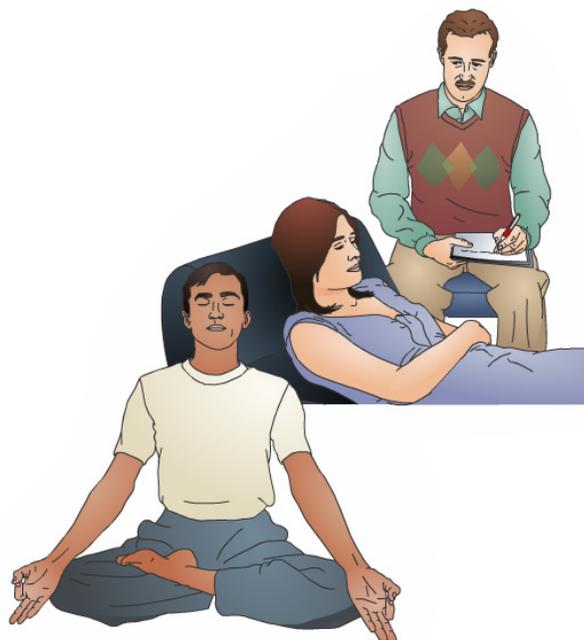
Biofeedback is a relaxation technique. It can help a person learn to control their body's functions, such as their heart rate. Relaxation therapy provides techniques to help a person manage stress, reduce tension in the body and improve concentration.

Medications are not often prescribed to treat night terrors. But benzodiazepines or some antidepressants may help reduce symptoms. Benzodiazepines are depressants that may make a person sleepy or relieve anxiety and muscle spasms.

To prevent night terrors at home:

- Make the sleeping environment safe.
- Increase your amount of sleep.
- Establish a regular bedtime routine.
- Manage stress.

Close and lock all windows and outside doors at night to prevent injuries. Block doorways or stairways with a gate. Move electrical cords or other objects that may cause someone to trip. Keep sharp or fragile objects out of reach. If your child has night terrors, do not let him or her sleep in a bunk bed. Before going to sleep, do quiet and calming activities. Read a book, meditate, take a bath or listen to relaxing music.



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Consider keeping a sleep diary to keep track of:

- How often night terrors happen.
- How soon after going to sleep night terrors happen.

Summary

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