

PARENT FACTSHEETS

NIGHT TERRORS

What are they?

Night terrors are very dramatic events that happen in the first few hours of sleep. They usually start with a blood-curdling scream with the child looking very scared. The child may stay in bed thrashing their arms and legs wildly around, or get up and start running as if they are being chased by something. They have a fast breathing and heart rate, are often very sweaty and their eyes are open with a glassy stare. The child doesn't recognize anyone and is unable to be comforted. Efforts to console the child often make the episode worse. The episode usually lasts 5-10 minutes and may recur more than once during the same night.

Night terrors are very distressing to watch as your child seems very upset and cannot be consoled. About 5 children in every 100 will have night terrors and they are most common in kindergarten and primary school aged children.

Why do they happen?

A child who is having a night terror is basically stuck halfway between being asleep and awake. They are awake enough to get out of bed, talk/scream and have their eyes open, but they are asleep in that they do not respond to a parent trying to console them and have no memory of the episode in the morning. (Compare this to a nightmare where the child is fully awake after a bad dream and responds to the parent and remembers the frightening dream in the morning.)

Often there is a history of night terrors or sleep walking occurring in another family member.

Night terrors occur in healthy children and usually do not indicate significant emotional or psychological problems.

What can I do?

- Stay calm and don't touch your child unless they are going to hurt themselves
- Keep the house safe - lock windows and doors, and clear the bedroom of objects they can step on or trip over.
- Don't discuss them the next day unless your child asks. Children and siblings often become upset by your reaction and may become anxious about going to bed.
- Maintain a regular sleep schedule and adequate sleep as overtiredness and changes in routine can precipitate events
- Episodes may become worse with illness and fevers, or if your child becomes very worried about something.
- If your child is to go away overnight or on a camp tell the caregivers about the night terrors so they can be prepared. Give them a copy of this handout.
- Night terrors do not have any long-term effects and in the majority of cases the child will outgrow them
- Further treatment may be necessary if the episodes become violent and there is a risk of injury; if there is extreme night-time disruption effecting the entire family; or if there is excessive sleepiness during the day.

Follow up

- Usually once your child is well, has a good sleep routine and has enough sleep, the night terrors settle down.
- It is not uncommon for children who have night terrors to experience episodes of sleep walking as well.
- Further investigations and treatment may be necessary if sleep walking episodes are
 - violent and there is a risk of injury
 - there is extreme night time disruption
 - Your child is very sleepy or tired during the day.

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