

Nightmares and night terrors in children



Key facts

Nightmares are vivid scary dreams that are common in childhood and sometimes in adulthood.

Night terrors differ from nightmares, as a child is not fully awake and usually doesn't remember the event.

Nightmares and night terrors are a normal part of development.

There is no special treatment for night terrors, and no need to worry, as most children will outgrow them.

On this page

What are nightmares in children?

What are night terrors?

What can you do to help?

When should I see a doctor?

How are night terrors treated?

Resources and support

What are nightmares in children?

Nightmares are vivid, scary dreams. Many children have nightmares. They usually happen around 90 minutes after going to sleep and can occur many times during the night. Nightmares are bad dreams that can cause children to wake up feeling scared and upset, and needing you to comfort them.

Most children have quite a few nightmares but will usually outgrow them between the ages of 9 to 11 years. Some children have a different dream every time they have a nightmare, while others may have the same nightmare over and over. Nightmares are a normal part of growing up and usually not a cause for concern. Parents should just support and reassure their children to reduce their anxiety, and with time they should go away.

What causes nightmares?

Often, nightmares have no known cause - they just happen randomly. In some instances, nightmares are linked to stress, fear, or trauma and can cause vivid images from the event.

What are night terrors?

Night terrors are feelings of extreme terror and panic, often during the first 2 to 3 hours after your child falls asleep at night. They are different from nightmares because your child is usually half asleep during the episode.

Children with night terrors usually wake within the first few hours of going to sleep and scream or call out. The night terror may last between 5 to 10 minutes, and may happen more than once in the same night. Usually, the child's eyes are wide open, but are staring and not focused. It can be very scary for parents as your child may seem very frightened and usually don't recognise anyone around them. Your child may not wake up even if you talk to them or sit them up, and usually, your child will not remember what happened the next morning.

Night terrors can happen to healthy children and are a normal part of development. They may be scary to watch, but you don't need to worry if your child has them.

What causes night terrors?

Night terrors might happen with no known cause. Sometimes, they run in families. Most night terrors are not caused by stress, diet, or parent behaviour. In some cases, not getting enough sleep can trigger them, and for some children, seizures, reflux, or fevers can cause night terrors.

What can you do to help?

If your child has a nightmare, comfort them. Tell them that the dream is not real, and that they are safe. Comforting them is usually enough to help them fall back to sleep. If your child keeps having the same nightmare, it might be possible to find out what is triggering it. It is helpful to talk with your child about the dream and ask if they have any worries or fears.

During a night terror, your child is usually not fully awake. It is best to check them and make sure they are safe. Be calm and stay with your child and wait for it to pass. Don't try to wake them. This can cause your child to be confused and make it harder for them to go back to sleep. Make sure the home environment is safe and lock doors and windows, as children having a night terror may sometimes run around. If your child often has night terrors and you are going out, make sure you tell the person looking after your child what to expect.

When should I see a doctor?

If your child is having a lot of nightmares or night terrors - or the nightmares or night terrors affect them during the day - talk to their doctor. They may want to rule out any medical problems that could be the cause.

It is good to see your child's doctor if the nightmares or night terrors are:

- happening a lot and affecting your family's sleep
- your child is sleepy during the day
- dangerous or risk injury to your child or yourself

How are night terrors treated?

There is no special treatment for night terrors, but your doctor can reassure

you that there's no medical cause, so talk to your child's doctor if you're worried.

Your child's doctor may refer you to a paediatrician, psychologist, or sleep specialist to rule out any underlying health conditions. They can offer treatments so sleep terrors happen less often, and help you set sleep habits, which can help your child sleep more soundly.

Resources and support

Speak with your child's doctor whenever you are concerned about their health or wellbeing.