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Night Terrors

Definition

- Your child is agitated and restless but cannot be awakened or comforted.
- Your child may sit up or run helplessly about, possibly screaming or talking wildly.
 - Although your child appears to be anxious, he doesn't mention any specific fears.
- Your child doesn't appear to realize that you are there. Although his eyes are wide open, he looks right through you.
- Your child may mistake objects or persons in the room for dangers.
 - The episode begins 1 to 2 hours after going to sleep.
 - The episode lasts from 10 to 30 minutes.
 - Your child can't remember the episode in the morning.
 - The child is usually 1 to 8 years old.

Cause

Night terrors are an inherited disorder in which a child tends to have dreams during deep sleep from which it is difficult to awaken. They occur in 2% of children and usually are not caused by psychological stress. Being overtired may trigger night terrors in some children. In addition to night terrors, there may be a family history of sleep-walking, motion sickness or migraine headaches.

Expected Course

Night terrors usually occur within 2 hours of bed time. Night terrors are harmless and each episode will end of its own accord in deep sleep. The problem usually disappears by 12 years of age or sooner.

Dealing With Night Terrors

Try to help your child return to normal sleep. Your goal is to help your child go from agitated sleep to a calm sleep. You won't be able to awaken your child, so don't try. Turn on the lights so that your child is less confused by shadows. Make soothing comments such as "You are all right. You are home in your own bed. You can rest now." Speak calmly and repetitively. Such comments are usually better than silence and may help your child refocus. Some children like to have their hand held during this time, but most will pull away. Hold your child only if it seems to help him feel better. There is no way to abruptly shorten the episode. Shaking your child or shouting at him will just cause the child to become more agitated and will prolong the attack.

Protect your child against injury.

During a night terror, a child can fall down a stairway, run into a wall, or break a window. Try to gently direct your child back to bed.

Prepare baby sitters for these episodes. Explain to people who care for your child what a night terror is and what to do if one happens. Understanding this will prevent them from overreacting if your child has a night terror.

Prevention of Night Terrors

1. Keep your child from becoming overtired. Sleep deprivation is a common trigger for night terrors. For preschoolers, restore the afternoon nap, if possible. If your child refuses the nap, encourage a 1-hour "quiet time." Also avoid late bed times because they may trigger a night terror. Move lights-out time to 15 minutes earlier each night until your child can self-awaken in the morning.
2. Use prompted awakenings for frequent night terrors. If your child has frequent night terrors, try this. For several nights, note how many minutes elapse from falling asleep to the onset of the night terror. Then awaken your child 15 minutes before the expected time of onset. Remind your child at bedtime that when you do this, his job is "to wake up fast." Keep your child fully awake and out of bed for 5 minutes. Carry out these prompted awakenings for seven consecutive nights.

Call Our Office During Regular Hours if:

- Jerking or stiffening occurs.
- Episodes last longer than 30 minutes or occur during the second half of the night.
- You have any questions.
- Episodes occur during the second half of the night.
- Your child has several daytime fears.
- You have other questions or concerns.