

Sleep - Nightmares

Definition

- Nightmares are scary dreams that wake a child from sleep
- Occasional bad dreams are normal at all ages
- Peak age is 3 to 12 years
- Nightmares can start as young as 6 months of age

Health Information

Symptoms

- Children wake up when they have a nightmare. They usually are fully awake and not confused.
- When infants and toddlers have a nightmare, they cry and scream until someone comes to them.
- When preschoolers have a nightmare, they usually cry and run into their parents' bedroom.
- Older children begin to understand what bad dreams are. They put themselves back to sleep without waking their parents.

Causes

- Everyone dreams 4 or 5 times each night. Some dreams are good, some are bad.
- Dreams help the mind process complex information and events from our daily lives.
- The content of nightmares usually relates to current developmental challenges such as:
- Infants have nightmares about separation from their parents, strangers or even learning to walk.
- Toddlers have nightmares about being left at child care, barking dogs, etc.
- Preschoolers have nightmares about monsters or the dark
- School-age children have nightmares about death or real dangers
- Frequent nightmares may be caused by violent TV shows or movies.

Care Advice

1. Reassure and Comfort Your Child:

- Explain to your child that she was having a "bad dream".
- For older kids, add "you are safe and we are nearby".
- Sit on the bed or hold your child until she is calm.
- If they want to talk about the dream, listen for what they are afraid might happen.
- Most children return to sleep fairly quickly.

2. **Help Your Child Talk About the Bad Dream During the Day:**
 - Talking about nightmares makes it less likely that they will recur.
 - You may need to remind your child of something he said to start the conversation.
 - If your child was dreaming about falling or being chased, reassure him that lots of children dream about that.
 - If your child has the same bad dream over and over again, it may relate to a stressor in real life. Try to determine what that challenge is. Then, help your child find better ways to cope with it.
 - If the recurrent bad dream is about something unreal, such as a monster, help him imagine a good ending to the bad dream. Encourage your child to imagine a powerful person or a magic weapon to help him overcome the bad parts of the dream. You may want to help your child draw pictures or write a story about the new ending for the dream.
 - Working through a bad fear often takes several conversations about it.
3. **How to Prevent Some Nightmares:**
 - Provide a nightlight, especially if your child has fears of the dark. Having a flashlight in bed may also help.
 - Offer to leave the bedroom door open, though some children feel safer with it closed.
 - Younger children are helped by a security object (lovey).
4. **Protect Your Child from Scary Movies and TV Shows:**
 - For many children, violent shows or horror movies cause bedtime fears and nightmares. These fears can persist for months or years.
 - Absolutely forbid any scary movies before 13 years of age.
 - Between 13 and 17 years, the maturity and sensitivity of teens varies. Decide carefully if your child is ready to deal with the uncut versions of R-rated movies. Remember that horror films are meant to frighten adults.
 - Be vigilant about slumber parties or Halloween parties. Tell your child to call you if the family he is visiting is showing scary movies.
5. **What to Expect:**
 - Bad dreams normally occur off and on again throughout life.
 - Frequent nightmares are not normal.

Call Your Doctor If

- Nightmares become worse
- Nightmares are not improved after using this technique for 2 weeks
- The fear from the bad dream interferes with daytime activities
- Your child has several fears
- You have other concerns or questions

Pediatric Care Advice

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