

PEDIATRIC ASSOCIATES OF NYC

NIGHT TERRORS

Night terrors are dramatic and can be distressing to parents. A child having a night terror may have their eyes open and usually appear very agitated, frightened and even panicked, as well as confused and dazed during an episode. A child will often cry out or scream at the beginning of the night terror and may mumble or give inappropriate answers to questions. A child having a night terror is often clumsy and may flail around, push a parent away, or behave in other strange ways. As disturbing and frightening as these events appear to the observer, children having them usually are totally unaware of what they are doing. In fact, night terrors are much worse to watch than to experience.

Night terrors almost always occur within 1–2 hours after falling asleep, last anywhere from a few minutes to an hour, and children have no memory of these events (note that sleep terrors can also occur during a nap). In addition, during these events most children avoid being comforted. They may get more upset if you talk to them and try to calm them down. This can be the hardest part for parents. Although a child having a night terror may appear awake, they are really asleep. A child who is experiencing a night terror is basically stuck halfway between asleep and awake.

Night terrors are not nightmares. Your child is not dreaming during these events, although it may look it. Night terrors are also not a sign of psychological problems or the result of a traumatic event.

WHAT CAUSES NIGHT TERRORS?

Night terrors are benign (not harmful) sleep behaviors. We do not know what exactly causes night terrors or why children look frightened during them. They are actually the same thing as sleepwalking, just more dramatic.

Night terrors are fairly common in children and usually occur in preschool-aged and elementary school-aged children. Most children outgrow night terrors by adolescence. In addition, night terrors and sleepwalking often run in families.

There are certain things that make it more likely for someone who is prone to night terrors to have an episode. These include:

- Not getting enough sleep
- An irregular sleep schedule
- Fever, illness
- Some medications
- Sleeping with a full bladder
- Sleeping in a different environment

HOW SHOULD YOU RESPOND TO YOUR CHILD'S SLEEP TERRORS?

- Keep your child safe.
- Don't wake your child.
- Don't discuss night terrors the next day.