



Important Things to Know About Sleep Terrors

- With sleep terrors you feel extreme terror and panic during the sleeping period
- It happens when you are in deep sleep
- It is most common in young children
- It is not very common in adults
- The cause can be stress, trauma, illness or just part of growing up
- Most of the time it can be treated

What are sleep terrors?

Sleep terror disorder means very strong feelings of terror and panic during sleep. You have them while you are in deep sleep. They are also sometimes called 'night terrors'. They tend to happen fairly soon after going to sleep. Two thirds of the time, they are in the first period of deep sleep. Sleep terror is not as well known as nightmares. The reason for this is that they are not as common. They are sudden and intense but don't last long. At most, they go for a few minutes. After they finish, the person doesn't remember much about the episode, if anything at all. They tend to start before the age of 10. Most of the time, they will stop when the child is a teenager. Sleep terrors may occur as often as several times a week.

- A person going through a sleep terror might make noises, move their body and have tremors and sweats. They will tend to have more fear and worry than if they were having a normal nightmare.
- People who have sleep terrors often **sleepwalk** as well.
- If a person doesn't stop having sleep terrors after the age of 10, the chances are they will still have them when they are an adult.

What causes sleep terrors?

Sleep terrors might seem to just come out of the blue. But there are several things that can play a part in causing them. They may run in families. Not getting enough sleep can also lead to sleep terrors. Chopping and changing the times you get up and go to bed is a risk as well. Some drugs have been linked to sleep terrors. In children, sleep terrors may be just a part of how they grow up (rather than from any major trauma).

There are also some disorders that are associated with sleep terrors. These include **obstructive sleep apnoea**, seizures, gastric reflux and fevers. You can also set off a sleep terror in a person who is vulnerable to them if you disturb them when they are asleep, e.g. by touching them or with noise.

How common are sleep terrors?

Most children never have sleep terrors. They occur in between 1% to 5% of children. In adults it is even less, about 1% to 2%.

How does it affect people?

Sleep terrors can wake you up suddenly. You might feel confused. The quality of your sleep is worse. Every now and then it can lead to problems going back to sleep. People who have sleep terrors may not get enough sleep. This can make them not function as well during the day. Changes in the sleep pattern due to sleep terror can lead to **anxiety** and **depression**.

How is sleep terror treated?

Parents should be able to comfort or send the child back to bed after a sleep terror, and as time goes on they usually stop by themselves. In adults with sleep terror, there are methods that can make them less common. These aim to establish the right frame of mind before bed. Often teaching **good sleep habits** is a part of this. However, in some cases sleep terrors happen often and lead to injuries. If so, sedatives can be prescribed.

What might your doctor do?

Your family doctor can refer you to psychologist or **sleep specialist**. They can treat you to make sleep terrors occur less often. As part of this, they might tell you things to help you sleep more soundly and set regular times to go to bed and get up. For adults, your doctor may prescribe short acting sedatives. These may stop sleep terror.

What could you do to help with symptoms?

If you avoid stress and have **good sleep habits**, then sleep terrors will happen less often. Also avoid stimulants (e.g. caffeine).

Where and when should you seek help?

If you or your child has been having sleep terrors and this is having a big impact on wellbeing, then you should talk to your GP.

What else might cause the symptoms?

Some adults do not grow out of sleep terrors, but there are ways to make them happen less often. Stress, trauma, some illnesses (including **sleep apnoea**), some medications and illicit drugs may also cause sleep terrors.

Where can I find out more?

<http://www.nightterrors.org/mot.htm>

This information is produced by:

Sleep Health Foundation

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A national organisation devoted to education, advocacy and supporting research into sleep and its disorders

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A voluntary group offering assistance and support to people and their families living with sleep disorders

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The peak national association of clinicians and scientists devoted to investigation of sleep and its disorders

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Ongoing concerns about sleep or other medical conditions should be discussed with your local doctor.

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