

Night Terrors

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You are just falling asleep when you are awakened by a blood-curdling scream coming from your daughter's room. You rush in and attempt to comfort her, but she resists you. She may thrash about wildly or even get out of bed and run around the room. You are terrified at this occurrence and frustrated by your helplessness. When it is over, she falls into a calm sleep and remembers nothing the next day.

You have just experienced an episode of night terrors with your child.

The sleep cycle has four non-dreaming stages during which brain activity and physical activity gradually decrease. The next and final stage of the sleep cycle is commonly known as REM, or Rapid Eye Movement, sleep and occurs about 90 minutes after the beginning of the cycle. During this stage, brain activity increases but physical paralysis occurs. Dreams only take place during this stage of sleep.

Night terrors occur only during the fourth non-dreaming stage of sleep and usually within the first third of the night. As the brain is transitioning from deep sleep to a period of lighter sleep, most of the brain is shut down. For a child experiencing night terrors, some motor circuits are still active when they should be quiet, resulting in behavior consistent with terror.

The symptoms of night terrors include:

- Screaming
- Rapid breathing and heart rate
- Wild thrashing or running around
- Sweating
- Confusion
- No response to efforts to comfort
- No recall of the episode
- Usually lasting 5-20 minutes, or possibly up to an hour

There are many possible triggers of night terrors, including sleeping in a cold room, being startled by loud noises, being overly tired, eating a lot before going to sleep, and a full bladder. A child may be more susceptible if she has a high fever or has been given a sedative medicine. Though these triggers do not cause night terrors, they may put the body into a state where night terrors can occur. Night terrors can also be linked to stress as well as physical or emotional shock. There are many unknowns in the background of internationally adopted children, but they have definitely undergone some major changes in their lives when they are adopted and brought to the United States.

What can you do if your child is experiencing night terrors? Protect her from the possibility of hurting herself: pick up toys, fasten safety gates at the top of stairs, and lock doors and windows before she goes to sleep. Do not argue with your child or wake her if she is still in bed. Even though her eyes may be open and she may be active, she is not really awake and will not recognize you. If possible, hug her and speak reassuringly to her, but don't force physical contact. She will eventually settle down into a calm sleep. She will not remember the event the next morning, and if you try to discuss it with her, it may only frighten her.

It is important to understand that night terrors are very different from nightmares. A nightmare tends to occur towards the end of the night, during REM sleep. After a child has a nightmare, she is usually fully awake and can describe the nightmare to you. If you go to your child as soon as she starts to cry, she will want you to comfort her. The sight, sound, or touch of you will soothe her back into a peaceful sleep. On the other hand, she is not awake during a night terror, and therefore will not be comforted by your arrival. If you try to awaken her, you may prolong the night terror or she may incorporate you into her terrified fantasy. She may also be frightened by your reaction.

Some of the ways you may prevent night terrors are to eliminate stress and have a regular routine. If her night terrors are frequent, one way of breaking the cycle is to wake her up about 30 minutes after she falls asleep, then tell her to go back to sleep. This will break up the deepest stage of sleep, when night terrors usually occur. Or, if your child has night terrors at the same time each night, wake her up approximately 15 minutes before she usually has them, then let her go back to sleep.

Night terrors usually subside as your child becomes more secure and settled in your home, and she may eventually outgrow them altogether. If your child is older, the night terror may reflect underlying emotional problems and you may find it helpful to consult a professional. Although night terrors are disturbing for you, your child will have no recall of the event. They are generally not harmful to your child as long as you have taken measures to keep her safe while they are occurring.