

## Nightmares

**Nightmares:** a dream occurring out of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep that elicits disturbing emotions both during the dream and upon awakening. Everyone has them once in awhile, from the young to the elderly. For some people, nightmares happen frequently.

## Features

Nightmares are so common as to be considered a normal part of our dream experience--once in awhile. Nightmare Disorder develops when particularly disturbing nightmares become frequent.

Even garden variety, normal nightmares can leave us feeling distraught. Dream sequences seem very real. They often involve some form of danger or oppression. The theme tends to repeat itself in subsequent nightmares. Some common scenarios include:

- > being chased by a predator or demon
- > the loss of family member(s) or loved one(s)
- > a disaster that ruins our home or belongings
- > an intruder who breaks into our home
- > being tortured by someone who may have actually harmed us at some point in our lives

Nightmares leave us feeling overwhelmed with negative emotions such as anxiety, anger, sadness, embarrassment, or grief. As vivid as nightmares can be, their content cannot cause us any physical harm. However, anxiety following a nightmare can deprive us of sleep, which may induce more nightmares. Most people can clearly recall the details of a nightmare, from the plot to the scenery.

**Bad Dream vs. Nightmare.** A bad dream is less powerful than a nightmare. Nightmares awaken us from sleep. Bad dreams do not.

**Nightmare vs. Night Terror.** These are entirely different experiences. Nightmares are a form of dreaming, which arise during REM sleep. Night Terrors, which arise out of NREM

sleep, do not involve dreaming but a partial arousal from sleep. Parts of the brain that control emotion arise while the rest of the brain sleeps.

## Diagnosis

An occasional nightmare poses no cause for concern, even if we lose a little sleep over it. A sleep evaluation may be of help if nightmares frequently disrupt sleep or cause great fear or stress about them. Keeping a sleep log will aid the diagnostic process. The log should reflect the frequency of nightmares, the time of night they occur, and a description of their content. Tests such as an overnight sleep study are not usually performed unless another sleep disorder is suspected.

## Treatment

Good sleep habits minimize sleep deprivation, which can aggravate nightmares. Psychotherapy may be used to address underlying psychological problems. A form of psychotherapy called Systematic Desensitization gradually addresses dream content related to particularly disturbing trauma. Additional therapies include: Relaxation Therapy, Hypnosis, and Stress Management. Parents can take specific measures to respond to a child following a nightmare:

- > Respond in a calm, reassuring manner to avoid frightening your child.
- > Offer a stuffed animal or security blanket
- > Put a dim nightlight in your child's room.
- > Reassure your child that nightmares are normal and will not harm them.



## Do I Have Nightmares?

I frequently awaken from sleep due to disturbing dreams.

They occur in the second half of the night.

I feel alert immediately upon awakening from a dream.

I can easily recall the details of these dreams.

The dreams involve a story-like plot with vivid images.

My dreams cause intense anxiety, fear, anger, or sadness.

I have trouble going back to sleep after a disturbing dream.

# SleepCaptions

## Nightmares Mechanics

Like other parasomnias, nightmares involve unpleasant events during sleep. They are also specific to a certain portion or stage of sleep called REM sleep. REM sleep is when dreams occur. Dreaming happens during sleep but is connected to our waking lives. The brain contains a large filing cabinet of memories. It files everything we do while we are awake. Some of those memories contribute to our dreams. This is perfectly normal. If we have experienced a traumatic event, severe life stress, or an emotional illness, the kind of memories that contribute to dreaming may be very powerful. If the dream is powerful enough to awaken us, we have a nightmare.



## Risks for Nightmares

- ✓ Emotional trauma
- ✓ Grief
- ✓ Life stress
- ✓ Other sleep disorders (narcolepsy)
- ✓ Fever or illness
- ✓ Certain medications
- ✓ Substance abuse
- ✓ Certain psychiatric disorders

## Effects of Nightmares

- ✓ Excessive daytime tiredness
- ✓ Anxiety and fear about sleeping

## Need more information?

Visit the SleepMedicine Education web site at: [sleepmedicineeducation.com](http://sleepmedicineeducation.com) for additional publications. See also:

**SleepIssues:** "Out of Sync"

**SleepGuides:** "Treating Sleep Disorders"

To schedule an appointment at any Sleep Medicine Centers location, visit [www.sleepmedicinecenters.com](http://www.sleepmedicinecenters.com)

or call:

(716)92-DREAM

(877)53-SNORE



## Did You Know?

According to studies cited by Sleep-Eval Research, there is a strong association between women who report nightmares and the presence of either a depressive disorder, an anxiety disorder, or both.

The American Academy of Sleep Medicine reports that 10-50% of children between ages 3 to 5 have severe enough nightmares to disturb their parents.

The National Center for PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) reports

that nightmares are one of the most common "re-experiencing" symptoms of PTSD, seen in approximately 60% of individuals with PTSD.

Approximately 2 to 8% of people experience Nightmare Disorder, according to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine.