

# Sleepwalking

## WHAT IS SLEEPWALKING?

Sleepwalking is very common, especially in preschool and school-aged children. Although children who are sleepwalking often have their eyes open and appear awake, they are actually *deeply asleep*. Thus, they may appear confused or dazed. They may mumble or give inappropriate answers to questions. And they are difficult to wake up. Some children simply walk into their parents' bedroom. Other children head to odd places, such as down to the basement or even outside. A sleepwalking child also may appear upset. A sleepwalker is often clumsy and may do odd things, such as urinating in a closet. Sleepwalking may last from a few minutes to as long as a half-hour or longer. Because they are asleep, children will have no memory of the event the next day. Sleepwalking can occur infrequently, every night, or even several times a night. Although generally considered benign (not harmful), parents should be aware that children who sleepwalk can injure themselves. For example, they can fall down stairs or head outside in the cold.

## WHAT CAUSES SLEEPWALKING?

Sleepwalking usually occurs during the deepest stage of sleep (also called “slow-wave sleep”). Thus, it is more likely to occur within the first 1 to 2 hours after falling asleep, since that is when deep sleep is most likely to occur. Sleepwalking is also more common in younger children, because they have much more deep sleep than do teenagers or adults.

Many children sleepwalk once in a while, with about 17% of children (1 in 6) sleepwalking regularly. Sleepwalking usually starts between 4 and 6 years of age, and peaks between ages 8 and 12 years. Most children outgrow it by adolescence, although some continue to sleepwalk into adulthood. Sleepwalking often runs in families. Children who sleepwalk are also more likely to have sleep (night) terrors and vice versa.

Sleepwalking is more likely to happen when your child doesn't get enough sleep. This is because the body gets more deep sleep after not getting enough sleep. And the more deep sleep, the more likely a sleepwalking episode will occur. Anything that results in not getting enough sleep, such as when your child first starts giving up her nap or there is a change in her schedule (for example, starting school) may trigger sleepwalking if your child is prone to this behavior. The likelihood of sleepwalking is also increased by anything that interrupts or disrupts sleep. These include the following:

- An irregular sleep schedule (going to bed and getting up at different times from one day to the next)
- Another sleep disorder, such as snoring or sleep apnea
- Fever, illness
- Some medications
- Sleeping with a full bladder
- Sleeping in a different environment, such as at camp or at a friend's or grandparent's home
- Sleeping in a noisy environment
- Stress

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## HOW SHOULD YOU RESPOND TO YOUR CHILD'S SLEEPWALKING?

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- **Keep your child safe:** Sleepwalkers can injure themselves or leave the house while sleepwalking. Make sure that all outside doors are secure. Ensure that windows, especially second story or higher, do not open wide enough that your child can jump out of them. Where your child sleeps should be made as safe as possible to avoid any accidents. Floors should not be cluttered, objects should not be left on the stairs, and hallways should be lit. Tying a bell to your child's bedroom door can alert you when your child is sleepwalking and leaving her room. Hotel door alarms (that hang from the doorknob or wedge under the door) can also let you know that your child is up during the night. Putting gates at the top of stairs can prevent falls.
- **Guide your child back to bed:** Guide your child gently back to bed while speaking to her in a calm and soothing manner. If your child gets upset when you try to guide her, then let her be and let the event run its course.
- **Don't wake your child:** Although not harmful to your child, nothing is gained by trying to wake a sleepwalking child. And, it may even make your child more agitated.
- **Make sure your child is getting enough sleep:** If your child seems tired in the morning, she may not be getting enough sleep. Sleepwalking itself does not make children tired, because they are asleep during the episodes. Since sleepwalking is much more likely to happen when your child does not get enough sleep, try moving bedtime earlier.
- **Maintain a regular sleep schedule:** Sleepwalking is also more likely to happen on nights when your child goes to sleep at a different time (or place) than usual. If your child is having a sleepover at someone else's home, let the parents know that your child is a sleepwalker.
- **Look for signs of other sleep problems:** If your child takes a long time to fall asleep, frequently wakes during the night, snores, or otherwise doesn't get a good night's sleep, she may be more likely to sleepwalk. Addressing these sleep issues often decreases or even eliminates sleepwalking.
- **Avoid caffeine:** Caffeine can disrupt your child's sleep and increase the likelihood of sleepwalking.
- **Additional treatment:** In most cases, sleepwalking requires no specific treatment. However, in cases in which a child is at risk for harm or sleepwalking is occurring frequently, treatment may be necessary. Treatment may include medication or behavioral techniques. Be sure to speak to your child's doctor if you are concerned.