

The Children's Doctor



For the last 2 weeks, my 3 year old son has been waking with bad nightmares at about 11pm every night. He is screaming and I can't seem to do anything to console him. He eventually will go back to sleep but this could be after 20 minutes. Is he traumatised by something during the day? How can I prevent these nightmares?

It is likely that your son is not having nightmares but is having “night terrors”. Nightmares are bad dreams and the child will often wake upset and frightened but can be consoled by you with a reassuring cuddle and will usually settle back off to sleep. Night terrors are a bit different. During a night terror, the child is not really awake and is not really asleep. They appear to be awake - they may sit up in their bed, stand up in their cot or walk around the house. Their eyes are often open and they often scream and look scared. However, they do not recognise their parents or familiar environment. Instead of settling with a cuddle, the restrictive hug from a parent may cause them to become more distressed and hit out and struggle. It is very difficult to wake a child whilst they are having a night terror and can often cause the episode to last longer. If the child is woken, they will be disoriented and confused.

Night terrors tend to occur in younger children and are exacerbated when a child is overtired. If a child has had a disruption to their recent routine with some late nights or poor sleep or if they have been sick, they are more likely to have night terrors. If your child is having a night terror, try to settle the child with minimal intervention. Leave the lights out if possible, talk in a repetitive gentle voice or softly sing a familiar song. This may encourage the child to settle. Gently coax the child back to bed with minimal direct contact. Make sure your child is given the opportunity to catch up on any lost sleep. This may mean having day sleeps or making bedtime a bit earlier.

Night terrors tend to occur at a similar time each night. If your child is persistently waking with night terrors, you may want to wake your child 15 minutes prior to the expected night terror. If you completely wake your child and then allow them to resettle, this may prevent the night terror from occurring. Your child will have no recollection of the night terror in the morning. Although you may be traumatised by the whole event, your child will be fine! If night terrors are occurring frequently and not settling, you may need to see your doctor.