

# Sleepwalking

## WHAT IS SLEEPWALKING?

Sleepwalking is a benign (not harmful) sleep behavior that is common in children. A sleepwalking child may have his eyes open, but usually appears confused or dazed during an episode, and mumbles or gives inappropriate answers to questions. Occasionally, a sleepwalking child may appear agitated. A sleepwalker is often clumsy and may perform bizarre or strange actions, such as urinating in a closet. Sleepwalking almost always occurs within 1–2 hours after falling asleep, lasts from 5 to 20 minutes, and children have no memory of these events. Although a child sleepwalking may appear awake, he is really asleep. Sleepwalking can occur infrequently or every night.

## WHAT CAUSES SLEEPWALKING?

We do not know what exactly causes sleepwalking but it is very common in childhood. Almost 40% of all children will sleepwalk at some time, with peak occurrence between 3 and 7 years. Sleepwalking often runs in families and most children outgrow it by adolescence. Sleepwalking can also be associated with night terrors.

There are certain things that make it more likely for someone who is prone to sleepwalking to have an episode. These include:

- Not getting enough sleep
- An irregular sleep schedule
- Fever, illness
- Some medications
- Sleeping with a full bladder
- Sleeping in a different environment
- Noisy sleeping environment
- Stress

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

- **Keep your child safe.** Sleepwalkers can injure themselves or leave the house during an episode. Make sure that all outside doors and windows are secure. The sleeping environment should be made as safe as possible to avoid accidental injury. Floors should not be cluttered, objects should not be left on the stairs, and hallways should be lit. Tying bells to your child's bedroom door can alert you to the sleepwalking incident. Some parents keep their sleepwalker confined to the bedroom by securely fashioning a screen door or high gate to the bedroom door.
- **Guide your child back to bed.** Guide your child gently back to bed while speaking to him in a calm and soothing manner.

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- **Don't wake your child.** Generally, nothing is gained by trying to wake a sleepwalking child, and it may even make your child more agitated. However, nothing bad will happen if he does awaken.
- **Ensure enough sleep.** Increase the amount of sleep that your child is getting and try to not let him become sleep deprived. Sleepwalking is much more likely to happen when your child does not get enough sleep.
- **Maintain a regular sleep schedule.** Sleepwalking is more likely to happen on nights when your child goes to sleep at a different time than usual.
- **Additional treatment.** In most cases, sleepwalking requires no 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 behavior modification techniques. Be sure to speak to your child's doctor if you are concerned.