SYMPTOM

Nightmares

Nightmares are vivid, upsetting dreams that may wake you feeling frightened or distressed.

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
A vivid, frightening dream that wakes me

WHERE IT IS FELT
In your mind during sleep, sometimes throughout your body

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Stress, sleep loss, upsetting experiences

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Dream enactment causing injury or immediate danger

USUALLY LASTS
Minutes; repeated nightmares may continue until the trigger improves

SEE A DOCTOR IF
Recurring weekly or disrupting sleep, mood, or daytime function

Overview

A nightmare is a vivid, disturbing dream that causes fear, anxiety, sadness, anger, or disgust. It may wake you fully, and you can often remember much of the dream.

Nightmares usually happen during rapid eye movement, or REM, sleep. This is the stage when dreaming is most active. REM periods become longer later in the night, so nightmares often occur toward morning.

An occasional nightmare is usually not a medical problem. Nightmares become more concerning when they happen repeatedly, make you avoid sleep, affect your daytime life, or place you or someone else at risk. Clinicians may use the term nightmare disorder when repeated nightmares cause significant distress or difficulty functioning. Having nightmares does not automatically mean you have this disorder.

What it may feel or look like

A nightmare may involve danger, loss, conflict, helplessness, or another threatening situation. The events can feel real while you are asleep.

You may wake with a fast heartbeat, sweating, tense muscles, or rapid breathing. You might feel alert immediately but have trouble calming down or returning to sleep. The memory may continue to upset you during the day.

Nightmares are different from night terrors. During a night terror, a person may scream, move, or appear frightened while still mostly asleep. They are often confused when awakened and remember little afterward. Night terrors usually occur earlier in the night.

Moving slightly during a dream can happen. Repeatedly punching, kicking, jumping from bed, or physically acting out a dream is different and should be discussed with a doctor because it can cause injury.

Common causes

Nightmares can have more than one cause, and sometimes no clear trigger is found.

Common triggers include:

Nightmares can occur with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety disorders, and other mental health conditions. However, having a nightmare does not by itself mean you have any of these conditions.

Some medicines can change dream intensity or sleep patterns. Nightmares may also begin after a medicine is started, stopped, or adjusted. Alcohol and other substances can disrupt sleep, while reducing or stopping regular use may temporarily produce vivid dreams. Do not stop a prescribed medicine suddenly without professional advice.

Less commonly, repeated nightmares may occur alongside sleep conditions such as sleep apnoea or narcolepsy. Dream enactment can be associated with REM sleep behaviour disorder, in which the usual muscle stillness of REM sleep is reduced.

- Emotional stress, anxiety, conflict, grief, or a major life change
- A frightening or traumatic experience
- Too little sleep, an irregular sleep schedule, or jet lag
- Frightening media or upsetting events close to bedtime
- Fever or illness that disrupts sleep

When to seek medical care

Call emergency services if you have thoughts, plans, or an immediate intention to harm

yourself or someone else, or if dangerous behaviour during sleep cannot be safely controlled. Severe confusion, agitation, or hallucinations while awake after stopping alcohol or another substance also requires emergency help.

Seek same-day medical care if you have injured yourself or someone else while acting out a dream, or if repeated dream enactment creates an immediate risk of injury.

Book a routine appointment if nightmares:

Dream enactment without an injury is not usually an emergency, but it still deserves prompt assessment. Until then, reduce nearby hazards and avoid sleeping close to sharp, heavy, or breakable objects.

- Continue for several weeks or happen regularly
- Make you afraid to sleep or cause ongoing sleep loss
- Affect your mood, concentration, work, school, or relationships
- Began after a new medicine or dose change
- Followed a traumatic event and remain distressing
- Occur with loud snoring, gasping, marked daytime sleepiness, or unusual movements

How the cause is found

A doctor will usually ask when the nightmares began, how often they happen, what you remember, and how they affect your sleep and daytime life. They may ask about recent stress, trauma, mood symptoms, medicines, alcohol or substance use, snoring, and movements during sleep.

A short sleep diary can help. Record bedtime, waking time, nightmares, daytime sleepiness, medicines, and possible triggers. If another person has noticed talking, kicking, gasping, or other behaviour, their description may be useful.

Most people do not need tests. A physical examination, mental health assessment, or medicine review may be appropriate. An overnight sleep study may be considered if symptoms suggest sleep apnoea, unusual dream enactment, seizures, or another sleep disorder. A sleep study records breathing, heart rate, movement, and brain activity while you sleep.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on what is contributing to the nightmares. Occasional nightmares may

improve with enough sleep and a steady routine. Try to keep similar sleep and waking times, allow time to wind down, and make the bedroom comfortable and safe. Reducing alcohol and avoiding caffeine late in the day may improve sleep quality.

If you wake from a nightmare, orient yourself to the present. Turn on a light, notice familiar objects, slow your breathing, or briefly leave the bed for a quiet activity. Avoid repeatedly checking the time, which can add pressure to fall asleep.

A therapy called imagery rehearsal therapy can help some people with repeated nightmares. You rewrite the nightmare with a less frightening ending and rehearse the new version while awake. A trained therapist can guide this approach, particularly when trauma is involved.

Counselling or trauma-focused therapy may help when nightmares are linked to anxiety, grief, or traumatic experiences. Treating another sleep problem may also reduce them.

A clinician may sometimes consider medication for persistent nightmares, but the choice depends on the cause, other health conditions, and possible side effects. Review current medicines rather than stopping them on your own.

What to expect

A single nightmare usually lasts only minutes, although distress can continue after waking. Nightmares related to short-term stress, illness, or sleep loss often settle when the trigger improves.

Repeated nightmares can last longer, especially when connected to trauma, a mental health condition, medication effects, or another sleep disorder. Improvement may be gradual. Keeping track of frequency and daytime effects can show whether self-care or treatment is helping.

Nightmares are common in childhood and often lessen with age. A child should be assessed if episodes are frequent, cause fear of sleeping, affect daytime behaviour, or involve dangerous movements.

Common questions

Does every nightmare mean something?

No. Dreams can reflect emotions and memories, but there is no single medical interpretation for a particular image or story. Frequency, distress, sleep disruption, and related symptoms are more useful than dream symbolism.

Are nightmares always caused by trauma?

No. Trauma is one possible cause, but stress, sleep loss, illness, medicines, substances, and sleep disorders can also contribute. Sometimes there is no obvious cause.

Why can I remember a nightmare so clearly?

Nightmares often wake you during REM sleep, when vivid dreaming is common. Waking directly from the dream makes it easier to remember.

Can nightmares harm the body?

Brief sweating, a racing heart, or rapid breathing is a normal stress response. The main physical risk comes from falling, striking objects, or hitting another person while acting out dreams.

Sources

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- Mayo Clinic: Nightmare disorder - symptoms and causes
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