

# Sleep Problems

About 70 million Americans have some kind of sleep problem, and for many it's a long-term problem. Even though sleep problems are very common, they are very often undiagnosed and untreated.

Here are descriptions of some of the most common sleep problems.

## **Bruxism**

Bruxism is grinding, gnashing, or clenching your teeth during sleep or in situations that make you feel anxious or tense. It can be mild and happen only once in a while, or it may be violent and happen often. Bruxism most often happens in the early part of the night. You may not be aware that you have bruxism until your teeth or jaws are damaged. People who have bruxism are also more likely to snore and develop sleep apnea.

## **Hypersomnia**

Hypersomnia is excessive daytime sleepiness or prolonged nighttime sleep. If you have hypersomnia, you feel very drowsy during the day and have an overwhelming urge to fall asleep, even after getting enough sleep at night. You often doze, nap, or fall asleep in situations where you need or want to be awake and alert. Other symptoms may include irritability, mild depression, trouble concentrating, and memory loss.

## **Kleine-Levin Syndrome**

Kleine-Levin syndrome is a rare disorder that causes you to be extremely drowsy off and on. You may sleep up to 20 hours a day. Other symptoms include eating too much, being irritable, feeling disoriented, lacking energy, and being very sensitive to noise. The disorder usually starts in the late teens and is more common in men than in women. Symptoms may last for days to weeks, then go away, and then come back.

## **Narcolepsy**

People with narcolepsy have sudden, uncontrollable urges to sleep. They may fall asleep unexpectedly for several minutes to an hour at a time, sometimes while driving. Their body relaxes so completely and so suddenly that they may fall to the floor. They awaken refreshed but may fall asleep again in another hour or two.

## **Nightmares**

Nightmares are scary dreams filled with monsters or frightening events. Most people have nightmares once in awhile, usually in the early morning hours. Nightmares may be the result of taking certain medicines, such as antidepressants, antihistamines, or sleeping pills. They may also be a sign of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or panic disorder.

## **Night Terrors**

Night terrors are fairly common in children, but are unusual in adults. Night terrors usually occur within 2 hours of bedtime and last from 10 to 30 minutes. During a night terror, you may:

- Be agitated and restless but cannot be awakened or comforted

- Sit up, possibly screaming or talking wildly
- Not respond even though your eyes are wide open and staring.

In the morning, you cannot remember what happened. Night terrors are harmless and each episode will end of its own accord in deep sleep.

### **Restless Legs Syndrome**

If you have restless legs syndrome (RLS), you have aching, twitching, tingling, burning, or prickling sensations in the lower leg muscles when you lie in bed or sometimes when you are sitting. Staying asleep is a problem as well. Things like rubbing your legs, getting up and walking around, or taking a hot shower usually offer only temporary relief. The sensations return when you go back to bed. The discomfort and sleeplessness that accompany RLS may distress you and cause depression. RLS is more common in people over 65.

### **Sleep Apnea**

Adults with sleep apnea repeatedly stop breathing for more than 10 seconds while they sleep. During normal sleep, throat muscles relax. Nasal blockage, a large tongue, or obesity may block your airway. This blockage stops the movement of air and the amount of oxygen in your blood drops. The drop in oxygen causes the brain to send a signal for you to wake up so that you open up the airway in your throat and start breathing again. If you have sleep apnea, this cycle may repeat as often as 50 or more times an hour. Generally you will not remember waking up but you may be very sleepy the next day.

### **Somniloquy (Sleep Talking)**

Sleep talking is speaking or making sounds while you sleep, usually for no more than 30 seconds. You seldom remember what you said or even that you were talking. Sleep talking is not usually considered a medical problem. However, it can be frustrating if it keeps someone sleeping with you awake.

### **Somnambulism (Sleepwalking)**

Sleepwalking is a tendency to wander during deep sleep. Sleepwalking usually happens during the second or third hour of nighttime sleep. While sleepwalking:

- You cannot be awakened no matter what you do.
- Your eyes are open, but staring blankly.
- You are not as well coordinated as when awake.
- You may do things such as dressing and undressing, opening and closing doors, or turning lights on and off.

Sleepwalking most often happens in children 4 to 15 years old. It tends to run in families and happens more often in boys.

## **When should I seek help?**

It may help to keep a sleep diary. To do this, write down the following when you get up each morning:

- What time you went to bed and what time you woke up
- How much time you think you actually slept

- How many times you woke up during the night and what time it was each time you woke up
- What you ate and drank before bed
- Your feelings before bed. For example, did you feel stressed or nervous?
- Your thoughts about how well you slept

If you sleep poorly for a month or more, or if you are so sleepy during the day that it interferes with normal tasks, see your healthcare provider. Your provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history and examine you. Your provider may ask:

- How many hours of sleep do you normally get at night?
- When and for how long do you nap?
- When do you awaken during the night? How long does it take to fall back to sleep?

Your provider may suggest that you spend a night in a sleep center. At the sleep center your breathing, eye movements, muscle tone, blood oxygen levels, heart rate and rhythm, and brain waves may be recorded while you sleep.

Most sleep disorders can be successfully treated or controlled once they are properly diagnosed.

You can get more information from:

- National Sleep Foundation  
202-347-3471  
<http://www.sleepfoundation.org>

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