



Nightmares are more common in children; however, one out of every two adults have (infrequent) nightmares. Between 2% and 8% of the adult population have regular nightmares. Nightmares usually occur during Rapid Eye Movement Sleep (REM). This phenomenon tends to occur in the latter part of the night and often awakens the sleeper, who is likely to recall the content of the dream.

Causes

Nightmares in adults can be spontaneous. They can also be caused by many factors and underlying disorders.

Often, a late-night snack can cause a nightmare. This is through increased metabolism which can signal the brain to be more active.

Drugs that act on chemicals in the brain, like antidepressants and narcotics, are often associated with nightmares. Non-psychological medications, including some hypertension medications, can also cause nightmares in adults.

Withdrawal from medications and substances, including alcohol and tranquilizers, can trigger nightmares. Any introduction of or changes in frequency of nightmares, after a change in medication, should be notified to your doctor.

Sleep Deprivation is also known to contribute to nightmares. This can be a 'vicious cycle' as frequent nightmares usually contribute to poor sleep quality.

There are certain psychological triggers that can cause nightmares in adults. Anxiety, Depression and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) also cause people to experience recurrent nightmares.

Nightmares can also be caused by certain UNTREATED Sleep Disorders. These include Sleep Apnoea and Restless Legs Syndrome. If no specific cause can be identified, chronic nightmares may be a distinct sleep disorder.

Criteria for a diagnosis of Nightmare Disorder

Repeatedly waking up with detailed recollection of long, frightening dreams that centre around threats to survival, security, or physical integrity and usually occur in the second half of the sleep or nap period.

Experiencing distress or impairment of occupational, social, or other key areas of functioning.

Having no general medical condition and using no medications or other substances that would cause these symptoms

Treatments

If nightmares are the result of a particular medication, it may be possible to change the dosage or change the medication prescription to something that doesn't have this side effect. You should contact your Doctor in this regard.

If nightmares aren't illness or medication-related, behavioural changes have proven effective for approx., 70% of adults who suffer from nightmares, including those caused by anxiety, depression and PTSD.

There are a number of other steps you can take on your own that may help reduce your nightmare frequency. Keeping a regular wake-sleep schedule is important. So is engaging in regular exercise, which will help reduce nightmare-causing anxiety and stress. Yoga and meditation can be helpful.

Remember to practice good sleep hygiene ([see this link](#)) which helps to ensure quality sleep.

DISCLAIMER: While every effort is made to ensure medical accuracy, this paper should not be used to diagnose or treat a sleep disorder. In all cases the advice of a properly qualified medical practitioner should be sought.

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