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# NOT BORING MEDIA

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## THE FAMILY THAT CANNOT SLEEP

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High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

### WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ Reading Passage
- ✓ Comprehension Questions
- ✓ Answer Key
- ✓ Teacher Guide

**GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4**

*Reading they'll actually do.*

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### WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)
- ✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4
- ✓ Complete answer key with explanations
- ✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

# THE FAMILY THAT CANNOT SLEEP

There is a disease that takes away your ability to sleep—permanently. It begins with insomnia, progresses to complete sleeplessness, and ends in death. There is no treatment. There is no cure. Fatal Familial Insomnia runs in only about 40 families worldwide.

The first symptoms usually appear between ages 40 and 60. A person begins having trouble sleeping—nothing alarming at first. But the insomnia worsens rapidly. Within months, the patient cannot sleep at all. No sleeping pill works. No sedative helps. The brain simply loses its ability to enter sleep.

What follows is a descent into nightmare. Without sleep, the body and mind deteriorate. Patients develop panic attacks, hallucinations, and severe weight loss. Their blood pressure becomes unstable. They sweat constantly. Eventually, dementia sets in as brain tissue degrades.

The entire process, from first symptom to death, typically takes 12 to 18 months. No one with Fatal Familial Insomnia has ever survived.

The disease is caused by a mutation in a gene called PRNP. This mutation creates abnormal proteins called prions, which accumulate in the thalamus—the brain region that regulates sleep. As prions build up, they destroy the thalamus, eliminating the brain's ability to initiate sleep cycles.

Because the disease is genetic and dominant, each child of an affected parent has a 50% chance of inheriting it. Some family members choose to be tested; many do not, preferring uncertainty over knowing their fate. Imagine discovering in your thirties that you carry a gene guaranteeing a horrific death in your forties.

Researchers are studying potential treatments, including drugs that might slow prion accumulation. Some patients have attempted medically induced comas, hoping to give their brains artificial rest. Nothing has worked so far.

Fatal Familial Insomnia remains one of the rarest and most terrifying diseases known to medicine—a reminder of how much we depend on something we often take for granted: the simple ability to close our eyes and sleep.

Word Count: 323 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: CNN

## COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1

**What causes Fatal Familial Insomnia?**

- ☐ A) A virus that attacks the brain
- ☐ B) A mutation that creates abnormal proteins called prions
- ☐ C) Extreme stress and anxiety
- ☐ D) Exposure to certain chemicals

2

**How long does the disease typically last from first symptoms to death?**

- ☐ A) A few weeks
- ☐ B) 12 to 18 months
- ☐ C) 5 to 10 years
- ☐ D) 20 to 30 years

3

**What does 'dominant' mean when describing this genetic disease?**

- ☐ A) The disease only affects men
- ☐ B) Only one copy of the gene is needed to cause the disease
- ☐ C) The disease is very aggressive
- ☐ D) The disease affects the strongest family members first

4

**Why do some family members choose NOT to be tested for the gene?**

- ☐ A) The test is too expensive
- ☐ B) They prefer uncertainty over knowing their fate
- ☐ C) The test is unreliable
- ☐ D) Doctors won't perform the test

5

The passage describes patients trying 'medically induced comas, hoping to give their brains artificial rest.' Why might this approach seem logical but ultimately fail?

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6

If you were in a family with this disease, would you choose to be tested? What are the arguments for knowing versus not knowing?

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## ANSWER KEY

### The Family That Cannot Sleep

**1. B) A mutation that creates abnormal proteins called prions**

*DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'The disease is caused by a mutation in a gene called PRNP. This mutation creates abnormal proteins called prions.'*

**2. B) 12 to 18 months**

*DOK 1 — Recall. The passage states: 'The entire process, from first symptom to death, typically takes 12 to 18 months.'*

**3. B) Only one copy of the gene is needed to cause the disease**

*DOK 2 — Vocabulary in context. The passage explains the gene is 'dominant' and children have '50% chance of inheriting it'—meaning one copy causes disease.*

**4. B) They prefer uncertainty over knowing their fate**

*DOK 2 — Text evidence. The passage states: 'many do not, preferring uncertainty over knowing their fate.'*

**5. Sample Response:**

A medically induced coma seems logical because the problem appears to be inability to sleep—so forcing unconsciousness might help. But FFI isn't just about being awake; it's about brain damage from prions destroying the thalamus. Even artificial unconsciousness can't repair destroyed brain tissue. This shows the disease isn't 'extreme insomnia'—it's progressive brain destruction.

**6. Sample Response:**

Answers will vary. Arguments for testing: allows planning, informed decisions about children, participation in research. Arguments against: knowing could cause years of anxiety; there's no treatment, so knowledge doesn't change outcome; uncertainty allows hope. Strong responses will consider both psychological and practical factors and acknowledge there's no clearly 'right' answer.

## **TEACHER GUIDE**

### The Family That Cannot Sleep

#### **STANDARDS ALIGNMENT**

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence

#### **PACING OPTIONS**

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- Some family members choose not to be tested. Would you want to know if you carried a fatal gene? Why or why not?
- There's no cure, but knowing might help you plan your life. How do we make decisions when the information itself is painful?
- We take sleep for granted until it's gone. What other 'basics' do we undervalue until we lose them?

#### **EXTENSION ACTIVITIES**

- Science: Research how prions differ from viruses and bacteria. Create a comparison chart.
- Research: Investigate the importance of sleep. What happens to the body and mind without it?
- Ethics: Should genetic testing for fatal conditions be mandatory, available, or discouraged? Defend your position.

#### **DIFFERENTIATION**

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

#### **SOURCE**

- CNN / Salt Lake Tribune