

# Sleepwalking

Sleepwalking is when someone walks or does complex activities while not fully awake.

It usually happens during a period of deep sleep. This peaks during the early part of the night. So sleepwalking usually happens in the first few hours after falling asleep.

Sleepwalking can start at any age but is more common in children. About 1 in 5 children will sleepwalk at least once. Most grow out of it by the time they reach puberty, but it can sometimes continue into adulthood.

## Causes of sleepwalking

The exact cause of sleepwalking is unknown but it seems to run in families. You're more likely to sleepwalk if other members of your close family have had sleepwalking behaviours or night terrors.

The following things can trigger sleepwalking or make it worse:

- not getting enough sleep
- [stress](#) and [anxiety](#)
- infection with a fever, especially in children
- drinking too much [alcohol](#)
- taking recreational [drugs](#)
- certain types of medication, such as some sedatives
- being startled by a sudden noise or touch, causing sudden waking from deep sleep
- waking up suddenly from deep sleep because you need to go to the toilet

Other sleep disorders that can cause you to wake up suddenly during the night can also trigger a sleepwalking episode. For example, restless legs syndrome and [obstructive sleep apnoea](#).

Preventing some of these triggers, such as getting enough sleep and using strategies to reduce stress, will often help.

## What happens when you sleepwalk

Some episodes of sleepwalking may involve sitting up in bed, looking around and appearing confused for a short time. In others, you may get out of bed and walk about, open cupboards, get dressed or eat, and may appear agitated.

In extreme cases, people can leave the house and do complex activities, such as driving a car.

The eyes are usually open when you're sleepwalking. But you will look straight through people and not recognise them. You can often move well around familiar objects.

If someone talks to you while you're sleepwalking, you may answer or say things that do not make sense.

Most sleepwalking episodes last less than 10 minutes, but they can be longer. At the end of each episode, you may wake up, or return to bed and go to sleep.

You will not have any memory of it in the morning or may have patchy memory. If you're woken up while sleepwalking, you may feel confused and not remember what happened.

## What to do if you find someone sleepwalking

The best thing to do if you see someone sleepwalking is to make sure they're safe.

Gently guide them back to bed by reassuring them. If undisturbed, they will often go back to sleep again.

Waking the person after the episode is over and then settling them to sleep can prevent another episode in the same sleep cycle.

Do not shout or startle the person. Do not try to physically restrain them unless they're in danger. They may lash out.

## When to contact your GP

Occasional sleepwalking episodes do not usually need medical attention. Sleepwalking is rarely a sign of anything serious. It may get better with time, particularly in children.

### You should consider seeing your GP if:

- the episodes happen often
- you're concerned the person may be at risk of injuring themselves or others
- the episodes continue or start in adult life

Your GP may refer you to a specialist sleep centre. A specialist will discuss your or your child's sleep history in more detail.

They may arrange sleep studies. This can rule out other conditions that can trigger sleepwalking, such as obstructive sleep apnoea or restless legs syndrome.

## Treatments for sleepwalking

There's no specific treatment for sleepwalking. But it generally helps to try to get enough sleep and have a regular and relaxing routine before bedtime.

Tips for a better sleep routine include:

- going to bed at a similar time each night
- making sure your bedroom is dark and quiet when you go to sleep
- limiting drinks before bedtime, particularly those containing caffeine
- going to the toilet before going to sleep
- finding ways to relax before going to bed, such as having a warm bath, reading or deep breathing

If your child sleepwalks at the same time most nights, try gently waking them for a short time 15 to 30 minutes before that. This may stop them from sleepwalking by changing their normal sleep cycle

Read about [sleep routine for babies and young children](#)

Medication is not usually used to treat sleepwalking. But medicines such as benzodiazepines or [antidepressants](#) are sometimes used if you sleepwalk often or there's a risk you could injure yourself or others. These medications can help you sleep and may reduce the frequency of sleepwalking episodes.

Therapies such as [cognitive behavioural therapy \(CBT\)](#) or hypnotherapy may sometimes be helpful.

## Preventing accidents

There are some tips to prevent accidents during sleepwalking episodes:

- remove any harmful objects or items you could trip over or break
- keep windows and doors locked

If your child sleepwalks:

- do not let them sleep on the top bed of a bunk bed
- fit safety gates at the top of the stairs
- tell babysitters, relatives or friends who look after your child at night that your child may sleepwalk and what they should do if it happens

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