



Parasomnias

Overview

Parasomnias are unusual things we do or experience while asleep or while partially asleep. Almost everyone has a nightmare from time to time. When someone has nightmares frequently, and they are very distressed about them, they may have Nightmare Disorder. Nightmare Disorder is considered a parasomnia since it is an unpleasant event that occurs while asleep.

The term parasomnia is much broader than nightmares, and a person with Nightmare Disorder has more than just the occasional nightmare event. In addition to Nightmare Disorder, other common parasomnia events include:

- REM Behavior Disorder (RBD)
- Sleep paralysis
- Sleepwalking
- Confusional arousals

What are common parasomnias?

Typically parasomnias are classified by whether they occur during the rapid eye movement (REM) sleep or Non-REM sleep. People with an REM parasomnia are more likely to recall their unusual sleep behaviors (for example, nightmare) than those with a Non-REM parasomnia (for example, sleepwalking).

REM Behavior Disorder (RBD)

Most dreaming occurs in REM sleep. During REM sleep, most of our body muscles are paralyzed to prevent us from acting out our dreams. In REM Behavior Disorder (RBD), a person does not have this protective paralysis during REM sleep. Therefore, they might “act out” their dream. Since dreams may involve violence and protecting oneself, a person acting out their dream may injure themselves or their bed partner. The person will usually recall the dream, but not realize that they were actually moving while asleep.

Sleep Paralysis and Sleep Hallucinations

During REM sleep our muscles are paralyzed to keep us from acting out our dreams. Sometimes REM-related paralysis or dream images can occur when falling asleep or when waking up from sleep. Sleep paralysis and sleep hallucinations can occur together or alone. When this occurs, we are fully aware of what is happening, so these events can be very scary. An event will usually last seconds to minutes and fortunately end on its own.

Sleepwalking

In sleepwalking, the person is just awake enough to be active but is still asleep and unaware of the activities. Sometimes disorders like sleepwalking are called “disorders of arousal” since the person is in a mixed state of awareness (not fully asleep or awake). Sleepwalking disorders can range from sitting up in bed to complex behaviors such as driving a car. Sleepwalkers are unaware of their surroundings, so they can fall down or put themselves in danger. Despite the myths, it is not dangerous to wake up a sleepwalker. However, the person will not typically recall the sleepwalking event and may be confused or disoriented.



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Confusional Arousals

We all have experienced that strange and confused feeling when we first wake up. Confusional arousal is a sleep disorder that causes a person to act that way for a prolonged period. Episodes usually start when someone is abruptly woken up. The person does not wake up completely and so remains in a foggy state of mind. The person with a confusional arousal may have difficulty understanding situations around them, react slowly to commands, or react aggressively as a first response to others.

What can I do for parasomnias?

Many people with parasomnias see an improvement by improving their sleep habits. Some sleep healthy sleep tips include:

- Ensure you are getting enough sleep
- Keep a regular sleep schedule
- Avoid consuming things at night that make it hard to wake up, like alcohol or other sedatives
- Avoid stimulants, like caffeine and smoking
- Keep the bedroom quiet to avoid being disturbed

Individuals with parasomnias should consider their safety during sleep. Some tips for bedroom safety include:

- Avoiding unstable objects near the bedside
- Keeping clutter off the floor near the bedside
- Closing and locking bedroom doors and windows to ensure they cannot go outside
- Considering an alarm or bell on the door
- Removing dangerous objects from the bedroom (for example, weapons)
- Avoiding elevated bedding. No bunk beds. Consider placing mattresses on the floor, and sleeping in ground floor bedrooms.