

Nightmares and Dream-Enactment Behaviors



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KEYWORDS

• Nightmares • Parasomnias • REM behavior disorder • Dreaming • Sleepwalking • REM sleep

KEY POINTS

- Parasomnias are undesirable motor, verbal, or experiential phenomena occurring in sleep and may be primary rapid eye movement (REM) or non-REM parasomnias or secondary parasomnias.
- Nightmare disorder and REM behavior disorder (RBD) are 2 types of primary parasomnias.
- RBD occurs when a person begins to physically act out a dream during the REM stage of sleep. These dreams tend to be unpleasant, action filled, or violent and often result in self-injury or injury to one's bed partner.
- RBD is often associated with the development of neurodegenerative disorders, such as Parkinson disease, multiple system atrophy, Lewy body dementia, and others.
- Nightmares are disturbing mental experiences that tend to occur during REM sleep. Episodes are often vivid and terrifying, result in awakening from sleep, and are often easily recalled.

INTRODUCTION

Normal behaviors in sleep are shown in **Box 1**. Parasomnias are disorders characterized by undesirable motor, verbal, or experiential phenomena occurring in association with sleep, specific stages of sleep, or sleep-awake transition phases.¹ Parasomnias are divided into 2 major categories: primary parasomnias (**Box 2**), which are disorders of sleep states, and secondary parasomnias (**Box 3**), which are caused by disorders of other organ systems that may manifest during sleep. Primary parasomnias are further subclassified as non-rapid eye movement (NREM) or rapid eye movement (REM) parasomnias. Associated abnormal movements, behaviors, emotions, perceptions, and dreams may occur. Actions associated with parasomnias are not consciously controlled and can result in physical injuries. Parasomnias can also result in adverse health effects, psychological disturbances, and disrupted sleep.

This article focuses on nightmares and dream-enactment behaviors, which are 2 categories of REM-related parasomnias.

NIGHTMARES AND DREAM-ENACTMENT BEHAVIORS

Introduction

Dreams occur during all stages of sleep. Dreaming is a sleep-related cognitive activity characterized by multisensory imagery, emotional arousal, and apparent speech and motor activity.² Although some researchers think dreams have no function, others suggest dreams are a continuation of daytime conscious thought processing.³ Dreaming may be important for learning, memory processing, and adaptation to emotional and physical stress.⁴

Nightmares are disturbing mental experiences that tend to occur during REM sleep. Episodes are often vivid and terrifying and result in awakening from sleep. The dreamer is often able to recall details of the nightmare, and themes often involve physical danger and emotional distress. Difficulty returning to sleep after a nightmare is common.

Nightmares may be unassociated with any underlying psychopathology. However, mental health issues, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse, stress, anxiety,

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Box 1**Normal behaviors in sleep**

Sleep starts: motor or sensory
 Exploding head syndrome
 Explosive tinnitus
 Sleep paralysis
 Hypnagogic/hypnopompic hallucinations

borderline personality disorder, and schizophrenia spectrum disorders, have been associated with nightmares.⁵ PTSD-associated nightmares have been the most studied. In fact, nightmares are part of the diagnostic criteria symptom cluster of intrusive/reexperiencing of the traumatic event. Eighty percent of patients with PTSD report PTSD-associated nightmares.⁶ Nightmares have also been associated with drug use (norepinephrine, serotonin, and dopamine acting drugs) and withdrawal from drugs (REM-suppressing, γ -aminobutyric acid [GABA], and acetylcholine-affecting drugs).^{7,8}

Definition**Nightmare disorder**

Nightmare disorder develops when a person frequently has recurrent nightmares that produce awakenings from sleep (**Box 4**). These nightmares may keep the person from returning to sleep, and they often occur in the latter half of the sleep period when REM sleep stages are longer.

Rapid-eye-movement behavior disorder

REM behavior disorder (RBD) occurs when a person begins to physically act out a dream during the REM stage of sleep (**Box 5**). These dreams tend to be unpleasant, action filled, or violent. Often the

Box 2**Primary parasomnias****NREM**

Confusional arousals
 Sleepwalking
 Sleep terrors

REM

REM behavior disorder
 Nightmares
 REM-related painful erections

Abbreviations: NREM, non-rapid eye movement; REM, rapid eye movement.

Box 3**Secondary parasomnias****Central nervous system**

Seizures
 Headaches
 Exploding head syndrome
 Tinnitus

Cardiopulmonary parasomnias

Arrhythmias
 Nocturnal angina pectoris
 Nocturnal asthma
 Respiratory dyskinesias
 Sleep hiccups
 Choking
 Coughing

Gastrointestinal parasomnias

Gastroesophageal reflux disease
 Diffuse esophageal spasm
 Abnormal swallowing

Miscellaneous

Nocturnal muscle cramps
 Nocturnal pruritus
 Night sweats

Benign nocturnal hemiplegia of childhood**Box 4****Nightmare disorder**

1. Recurrent episodes of awakenings from sleep with recall of intensely disturbing dream mentations, usually involving fear or anxiety but also anger, sadness, disgust, and other dysphoric emotions
2. Full alertness on awakening, with little confusion or disorientation; immediate and clear recall of sleep mentation
3. Presence of at least one of the following associated features:
 - a. Delayed return to sleep after the episodes
 - b. Occurrence of episodes in the latter half of the habitual sleep period

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