

Sleep Disorders

What Are Sleep Disorders?

Pediatric sleep disorders alter sleeping habits and change regular sleep patterns. Many sleep disorders can harm physical health and emotional well-being. Children who have a disability or complex medical condition are much more likely to experience sleep problems than typically developing children are.

Sleep disorders can be grouped into three main categories:

- Lack of sleep (insomnia)
- Excessive sleep (hypersomnia)
- Problematic behaviors—such as sleepwalking, snoring or seizures—that occur during sleep (parasomnia)

Up to 30 percent of children and teens may have sleep disorders at some point. For children and teens who have disabilities and complex medical conditions, however, the rate might be even higher. For example, studies indicate that 50 percent of children who have cerebral palsy also have a diagnosable sleep disorder and half of children who have craniofacial conditions also have obstructive sleep apnea.



Insomnia

Insomnia (difficulty falling to sleep, difficulty staying asleep, or waking up at night). Some children have conditioned insomnia—they may, for example, need a parent to help them fall asleep.

Insomnia Symptoms and Effects

The most common symptoms of insomnia include:

- Daytime sleepiness
- Frequent accidents or injuries
- Hyperactivity
- Irritability, mood swings or depression
- Poor attention span or poor memory

What Causes Insomnia?

Difficulty falling or staying asleep is often caused by:

- Changes in environment or schedule
- Chronic pain
- Depression
- Medications or other stimulants
- Medical conditions or disorders
- Stress or anxiety

Parasomnias

Parasomnias are a group of sleep disorders in which unusual or atypical behavior occurs while a child is falling asleep or during sleep. Kids often don't remember these behaviors when they wake up. Many parasomnias are common in children, but children typically outgrow them by the time they reach adulthood. Parasomnias include sleepwalking, night terrors and other unusual behaviors (like walking or talking) while a child is falling asleep or during sleep.

Parasomnias Symptoms and Effects

Many of the symptoms related to parasomnias are mild, but sometimes they become bothersome enough to require medical attention. For example, unusual movements and vocal sounds may actually be nighttime seizures.

Parasomnias include the following behaviors:

- Confusion after waking
- Hallucinations
- Sleep-related eating
- Sleepwalking

- Talking or screaming
- Teeth grinding (this is called bruxism)

What Causes Parasomnias?

Parasomnias might be related to:

- Stress
- Medications
- Other disorders and medical conditions

Night Terrors

Night terrors are a type of parasomnia. Night terrors include repeated episodes of intense crying, screaming and fright during sleep. Children are often confused, inconsolable, or screaming and thrashing.

Night terrors usually occur about 90 minutes after a child falls asleep. Children experiencing night terrors are difficult to wake. Once they wake up, they might not respond to attempts to provide comfort. Night terrors are not as common as nightmares, and children rarely remember the episodes in the morning.

Night Terrors Symptoms and Effects

Some common symptoms of night terrors include:

- Abrupt disturbances during sleep
- Sweating and increased heart rate
- Screaming
- Difficulty waking
- Confusion after waking
- Inability to remember dreams or nightmares

What Causes Night Terrors?

The cause of night terrors is unknown, but they might be triggered by:

- Fever
- Lack of sleep
- Periods of emotional tension, stress or conflict

Hypersomnolence

Hypersomnolence (daytime tiredness, sleepiness), which causes children to sleep too much or be sleepy most of the time. It is common in children and teens who have [traumatic brain injuries](#) or developmental disorders.

Hypersomnolence Symptoms and Effects

Symptoms of hypersomnolence usually include:

- Daytime sleepiness

- Decreased energy, slow thinking and slow speech
- Difficulty waking
- Disorientation after waking
- Increased irritation and anxiety
- Loss of appetite
- Poor memory
- Restlessness

What Causes Hypersomnolence?

Common causes of excessive sleeping or sleepiness are:

- Depression
- Medications
- Low thyroid function (hypothyroidism)
- Traumatic brain injury
- Other medical conditions or disorders

Sleep Apnea

Obstructive sleep apnea occurs during sleep. Throat muscles occasionally relax; blocking air flow in the nose and mouth (this is called apnea). To stop the apnea, a child briefly wakes up, which interferes with sleep. Sleep disturbances caused by sleep apnea can produce stress hormones and lead to daytime sleepiness, irritability, and changes in the ways the body uses energy.

Sleep Apnea Symptoms and Effects

Some of the most common symptoms and effects of sleep apnea include:

- Bed wetting (also known as enuresis)
- Pauses in breathing or gasping in sleep
- Depression, irritability, difficulty concentrating or mood swings
- Difficulty falling asleep
- Frequent waking
- Drowsiness and lethargy

- Preference for sitting up to sleep
- Headaches
- High blood pressure
- **Seizures**
- Snoring
- Waking up with a sore throat or dry mouth

What Causes Sleep Apnea?

There are many factors that can contribute to a child having obstructive sleep apnea.

- Children who are overweight are at an increased risk of obstructive sleep apnea because fat deposits around the throat and neck sometimes narrow the airway.
- Because children who have **cerebral palsy** and certain **neuromuscular conditions** typically have abnormal muscle tone and might be unable to reposition themselves during sleep, they are more likely to develop sleep apnea than other children are.
- Children who have craniofacial conditions (such as **cleft lip and palate**, **craniosynostosis** or **Apert syndrome**) have a greater risk of developing sleep apnea because their airways, jaws, and openings at the back of the throat are often small.
- Enlarged tonsils and adenoids (tissues in the back of the nasal cavity) can also cause sleep apnea.

Circadian Rhythm Disorders

Circadian rhythm disorders (Mixed up sleep schedules, having days and nights flipped, and night-owliness), which cause kids to sleep and wake on an unusual schedule.

Circadian Rhythm Disorders Symptoms and Effects

Typical symptoms of circadian rhythm disorders include:

- Daytime sleepiness
- Difficulty waking

What Causes Circadian Rhythm Disorders?

An out-of-sync sleep schedule is often caused by:

- Changes in routine

- Changes in time zones
- Medications

Restless Leg Syndrome

Restless leg syndrome (RLS) is a movement disorder. It often causes an irresistible urge to move the legs and unpleasant feelings when the legs are at rest. It often causes leg discomfort or the urge to move the legs when trying to go to sleep. The urge usually arises at bedtime, but it also can occur when the legs have been inactive, such as after sitting still for a long period of time.

RLS Symptoms and Effects

Typical symptoms of restless leg syndrome include:

- Crawling, burning or tingling feeling in the legs
- Daytime exhaustion, fatigue or sleepiness
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- Urge to move the legs is temporarily relieved by movement, stretching or massage

Sleep-Related Anxiety

Sleep-related anxiety or nightmares includes feeling worried or stressed in the night. These worries may be related to pandemic sleep changes, changes in sleep schedules or generalized anxiety regarding the changes COVID has brought upon us.

Diagnosis and Treatment for Sleep Disorders

The first step in effectively treating sleep disorders is diagnosis. For example, nighttime seizures might appear to be a sleep disorder—it's important to understand exactly what's going on before proceeding with treatment.

To help make a diagnosis, tests for sleep disorders can include:

- Sleep consultation
- **Sleep study (also known as polysomnography)**, often including **video electroencephalogram (VEEG)** and/or positive airway pressure titration
- Actigraphy—a test used to determine sleep patterns and circadian rhythms

- Evaluation (in collaboration with [neurology](#)) for [epilepsy and seizures](#)
- Multiple sleep latency test

At Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare, your family will work with leading [sleep medicine specialists](#) for children and teens. The following are some common treatments used with sleep disorders:

Sleep Apnea Treatment

Wearing a continuous positive air pressure (CPAP) mask—a mask over the nose that releases a puff of air into the throat, relieving obstructions so the airway won't collapse—can help. In other situations, surgery to remove the tonsils or adenoids helps to open the airway.

Insomnia Treatment

Sometimes medicines can help kids with falling and staying asleep. In other cases, behavior changes can help children fall asleep (for example, learning to sleep without a parent being in the room).

Hypersomnolence Treatment

Stimulant medicines might help a child stay awake or to feel less sleepy.

Circadian Rhythm Disorders Treatment

For some kids, light therapy, medicines or a combination of both can help to reprogram the biological clock and create new sleeping and waking schedules.

Integrated Care

Children who have disabilities such as [cerebral palsy](#), craniofacial conditions, [epilepsy](#), [neuromuscular conditions](#), and other neurological disorders often have sleeping problems, too. A complex condition paired with a sleep disorder can affect the health—and quality of life—for your child and your family.

At Gillette, your child will benefit from one of the nation's only [sleep medicine](#) programs designed specifically for people who have disabilities and complex conditions. In addition to sleep health services, your child might need comprehensive care that requires experts from a variety of specialties.

We'll help you determine which specialties should be part of your child's treatment. Gillette sleep health specialists often collaborate with:

- [Neurodiagnostics](#)
- [Neurology](#)
- Neurosciences Inpatient Care
- [Pulmonology and Respiratory Care](#)

Make An Appointment

651-290-8707

Refer a Patient

651-325-2200

This information is for educational purposes only. It is not intended to replace the advice of your health care providers. If you have any questions, talk with your doctor or others on your health care team.

If you are a Gillette patient with urgent questions or concerns, please contact Telehealth Nursing at **651-229-3890**.