Parasomnias and Safety Precautions: A Patient and Family Handout

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WHAT ARE PARASOMNIAS?

Parasomnias are unusual movements or feelings that happen while going to sleep, while asleep, or while waking up from sleep. They are classified as rapid eye movement (REM) parasomnias or non–rapid eye movement (NREM) parasomnias, depending on the stage of sleep when they occur. They can occur at any age. Parasomnias are concerning because they can lead to disrupted sleep, injuries, or poor health effects.

WHAT ARE NREM PARASOMNIAS?

NREM parasomnias are listed in Table 1. They include sleepwalking and sleep terrors. They happen when a person partly wakes up from deep sleep. NREM parasomnias occur earlier in the night. They are more common in people with a family history of similar disorders. Safety is a concern with some NREM parasomnias because walking outside the bedroom, and injuries can occur. Sleep terrors may be worrisome for a family member. With sleep terrors, the person involved, who is often a child, may scream and appear scared.

WHAT ARE REM PARASOMNIAS?

REM parasomnias are described in Table 1. They include REM sleep behavior disorder (RBD). You may have RBD if you answer "yes" to the following question: "Have you ever been told, or suspected yourself, that you seem to 'act out your dreams' while asleep (for example, punching, flailing your arms in the air, making running movements, etc.)?" Safety is a big concern with RBD. If you have RBD, you can injure yourself or others because you are involved in your dream. This means that you are not aware of your surroundings, including anyone else with whom you share the room. Safety precautions must be taken.

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Table 1. Types of parasomnias

NREM parasomnias	
Sleepwalking	Walking or other movements associated with NREM sleep
Confusional arousals	Confusion or fogginess when woken up from NREM sleep
Sleep terrors	Episodes of apparent terror, often with crying, screaming, rapid heart rate and breathing, and/or sweating during NREM sleep
Sleep-related eating disorder	Recurrent eating and/or drinking during sleep without full awareness
REM parasomnias	
REM sleep behavior disorder	Episodes of acting out intense or violent dreams
Recurrent isolated sleep paralysis	Recurrent feelings of being unable to move briefly while going to sleep or while waking up from sleep
Nightmare disorder	Frequent disturbing or frightening dreams

Definition of abbreviations: NREM = non–rapid eye movement; REM = rapid eye movement.

WHAT PRECAUTIONS SHOULD YOU TAKE TO ENSURE SAFETY DURING SLEEP?

Safety is a priority with parasomnias. You need to have a safe sleeping space to decrease the risk of injury to yourself and others. Recommended parasomnia safety precautions are listed in Table 2.

HOW CAN PARASOMNIAS BE MINIMIZED OR REDUCED?

Lack of sleep, a variable sleep schedule, stress, and sleep disturbances increase the risk of parasomnias. Therefore, you should do the following:

- Get adequate sleep. Recommended hours of sleep per night are listed below:
  - Toddlers (1–2 yr old): 11–14 hours
  - Preschoolers (3–5 yr old): 10–13 hours
  - School-age kids (6–13 yr old): 9–11 hours
  - Teenagers (14–17 yr old): 8–10 hours
  - Adults (18–64 yr old): 7–9 hours
  - Adults (≥65 yr old): 7–8 hours
- Go to bed about the same time every night.
- Wake up at the same time each day.
- Reduce stress. Try relaxation techniques and mindfulness meditation.
- Practice good sleep and daytime habits that decrease sleep disturbances. These include the following:
  - Avoid bright lights and electronics within 2 hours before bedtime.
  - Keep your bedroom dark during sleep.
  - Get sunlight exposure in the morning.
  - Eat a healthy diet. Limit processed foods and added sugars. Eat more plant-based foods. Pick foods higher in protein and fiber.
  - Exercise, but not in the few hours before sleep.
  - Silence your phone and avoid noises during sleep.
  - Avoid alcohol and nicotine.
  - Avoid caffeine within 8 hours of bedtime.
- Treat other sleep disorders that cause sleep disturbances, such as sleep apnea and restless legs syndrome.
- Review your medications with your healthcare provider to determine if any could be adding to sleep disturbances or parasomnias.

Table 2. Parasomnia safety precautions

Bed safety

- Lower the mattress to the floor if you have fallen out of bed.
- Avoid tall beds or bunk beds.
- Consider using a mattress alarm that will "go off" if you get out of the bed.

Bedroom safety

- Remove all weapons from the bedroom.
- Remove any object from the bedroom that could cause injury if thrown.
- Remove or pad furniture that has sharp edges or corners.
- Lock bedroom doors and windows.
- Place alarms on exterior windows and doors.
- If you cannot sleep on the main level of your home, place a tall dresser in front of the bedroom window.
- Use an indoor alarm on your bedroom door.
- Keep your bedroom floor clear of clutter and anything you can trip over.
- Remove objects away from your bed, such as nightstands, shelves, or lamps.
- If your nightstand must stay, remove any fragile or heavy items.

Other safety

- Sleep in a bedroom. Do not sleep in a common area, such as a family room.
- If you are having significant movements in sleep, sleep in a separate room from others.
- Sleep on the first/ground level of your home.
- If stairs are in the household, consider using guard rails or safety gates.

Although doing the above can reduce parasomnias, sometimes additional treatment may be recommended by your healthcare provider.

ACTION STEPS

- If you are having concerning movements or feelings during sleep, talk with your healthcare provider. You may need further evaluation to determine the possible cause and if treatment is needed.
- Take safety precautions.
- Get enough sleep, have a regular sleep schedule, and practice good sleep habits.
- Treat other sleep disorders, such as sleep apnea.
- Review your medications.

RESOURCES

- American Thoracic Society
  - https://www.thoracic.org/patients/patient-resources/topic-specific/sleep-problems.php
- National Sleep Foundation
  - https://www.thensf.org/sleep-health-topics/
- American Academy of Sleep Medicine: Sleep Education
  - https://sleepeducation.org/

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