Bedwetting and sleep

Bedwetting

Bedwetting at night (Nocturnal enuresis)

All of us learn bladder control at different ages, just as we learn to walk or talk at different times. Bedwetting, also known as nocturnal enuresis, is common in childhood. Bedwetting affects the sleep of both the child and the parent/carer, so should not be ignored.

It is important to remember that **children who wet the bed cannot help it**. For many years, it was thought that leaving the child in wet sheets means the sensation or the shame will inspire change. This is not the case, and will leave the child (and parent!) unhappy and frustrated.

There are two kinds of bedwetting, and it can be useful to know this when speaking to a GP or enuresis nurse:

Primary = When a child has never been dry, or was dry for less than 6 months

Secondary = When a child has been previously dry for at least 6 months, and started bedwetting again

Both primary and secondary enuresis can involve wetting during the day, but they also may not.

Other daytime symptoms include:

- Holding for long periods - Needing to wee more frequently

Getting bedwetting checked out

If your child is aged over 5 years old and wets the bed during sleep at least 2 times a week, you should speak to your GP about a referral to an enuresis (bedwetting) clinic.

Children under 5 often need nighttime nappies or pullups, even if they are dry through the day. This is developmentally normal.

Possible reasons why a child may wet the bed:

1) Having an overactive bladder. This can lead to:

- Needing to go for a wee more than 7 times per day, with more urgency
- Smaller bladder capacity, which can mean they wet multiple times in the night

2) Not waking when needing to wee

- A child's brain is not sending the signals that the bladder is full, so will stay asleep and then wet the bed.

Often parents think bedwetting is happening because their child is a "deep sleeper", however bedwetting is not due to depth of sleep. Our sleep structure is similar in bedwetters and non-bedwetters.. For most children, bedwetting happens because their brain does not respond to signals that the bladder is full, so doesn't wake up.

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Why does my child wet the bed?

Other reasons your child may wet the bed

Several factors have been associated with an increased risk of bedwetting in children and young people, including:

- **Medical conditions:** Such as constipation, urinary tract infections and diabetes.
  If you are concerned a medical condition could be causing your child to wet the bed, speak to your GP.
- **Stress and anxiety:** We all experience stressful events, and often a symptom of dealing with that event for children can be wetting the bed. Stressful or routine-changing events, such as moving house, the arrival of a new baby, or starting a new school can all result in a child starting to wet the bed (again). Bullying, being hospitalised, the death of someone close, or divorce are challenging for a child to process.
  If your child was previously dry and they start wetting the bed, you may wish to gently explore with the child if something is upsetting them. Finding ways to manage stress or anxiety during the day, and reassurances about any big life changes can help.

What do people try?

- "Wait and Watch" or "The child will grow out of it"

While some children do grow out of bedwetting, not all do. If a child is a severe wetter (7 nights per week), or over 7 years of age and wets the bed, intervention is necessary to avoid wetting continuing to adulthood.

- Lifting the child and taking them to the toilet in the night

This seems like a simple solution, but actually should be avoided, as it can lead to:
- Having to lift your child multiple times at night
- Sleep disruption, leaving the child and parent/carer tired
- Your child still not learning the signals that their bladder if full
- Difficulties when your child gets older and becomes too heavy to lift

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What can I do?

Simple measures to try

If your child is wetting the bed and you are looking for some ideas to help, these suggestions are worth trying. However, we would recommend speaking with a GP or getting a referral to an enuresis clinic for more support.

The charity ERIC (The Children's Bowel & Bladder Charity) also have useful information and a helpline - www.eric.org.uk

Having plenty of drinks

It is tempting for to restrict drinks when bedwetting is a problem, but your child should be drinking regularly throughout the day

- 1 to 1.5 litres per day for 4-8 year olds
- 1.5 to 2.5 litres per day for 9-13 year olds
- 2 to 3.5 litres per day for 14-18 year olds

Avoiding certain drinks

Drinks that include caffeine and sugar should be avoided, especially late afternoon and through the evening. This includes tea, coffee, and fizzy drinks. Drinks containing blackcurrant are also known to stimulate the bladder, so best to avoid dilute and fresh blackcurrant juice, such as Ribena.

High fibre diet

A diet rich in fibre, including fruit, vegetables and cereals, can help avoid constipation, which puts pressure on the bladder and bowel.

Diary

Keeping a diary of drinks and toilet trips can help you see if there is a pattern or are any triggers to avoid.

Train the bladder

During the day, drinking more than usual means the bladder is practicing that connection between bladder and brain to know what a full bladder feels like. It then "tells" the brain of the need to go to the toilet when awake. That message pathway is then reinforced and it will respond and wake the child up at night.

Regular toileting

If your child is drinking enough, they should also need to regularly visit the toilet through the day. A trip to the toilet should be included before bed each night.

Protect the mattress

A plastic mattress protector under a cloth bedsheet or absorbent disposible pads can help while you are working on bedwetting. This should, as the name suggest, protect your child's mattress, and make cleaning up after an episode easier. This in turn may reduce the embarrassment or shame your child may feel.

Lighting

Leaving a light on between your child's bedroom and the bathroom means they can find their way more easily when they do wake and need to use the toilet

Rewards for positive behaviour

Having rewards in place for agreed behaviours, rather than dry nights, such as drinking enough fluids during the day and using the toilet before bedtime, can help encourage your child to do everything they can without the focus being on not wetting the bed, which is out of their control.

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