

# Sleepwalking: Understanding Causes, Risks, and Management

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## DESCRIPTION

Sleepwalking, or somnambulism, is an interesting yet perplexing phenomenon that affects millions of people worldwide. It involves walking or performing other complex behaviors while still in a state of partial sleep. Despite its portrayal in popular culture, sleepwalking can pose significant risks and challenges. This article delves into the causes, risks, and management strategies for sleepwalking, providing a comprehensive understanding of this intriguing sleep disorder.

### What is sleepwalking?

Sleepwalking is classified as a parasomnia, a group of sleep disorders characterized by abnormal movements, behaviors, emotions, perceptions, and dreams that occur during sleep. Typically, sleepwalking episodes occur during the deep stages of Non-Rapid Eye Movement (NREM) sleep, particularly in the first half of the night.

During a sleepwalking episode, an individual may sit up in bed, walk around the room or house, perform routine activities, or even engage in complex behaviors such as driving a car. Despite appearing awake, sleepwalkers are typically unresponsive to their environment and may have no memory of the episode upon waking.

### Causes of sleepwalking

The exact cause of sleepwalking is not fully understood, but several factors are believed to contribute to its occurrence. These include

**Genetics:** Sleepwalking often runs in families, suggesting a hereditary component. Individuals with a family history of sleepwalking are more likely to experience it themselves.

**Sleep deprivation:** Lack of sufficient sleep can increase the likelihood of sleepwalking episodes. Deep sleep, which is when sleepwalking occurs, is more intense after periods of sleep deprivation.

**Stress and anxiety:** Emotional stress and anxiety can disrupt normal sleep patterns and increase the risk of sleepwalking.

**Medical conditions:** Certain medical conditions, such as sleep apnea, restless legs syndrome, and Gastro-Esophageal Reflux Disease (GERD), have been associated with sleepwalking.

**Medications:** Some medications, particularly those that affect the central nervous system, can trigger sleepwalking. These may include sedatives, hypnotics, and certain psychiatric medications.

**Substance use:** Alcohol and recreational drugs can interfere with normal sleep cycles and contribute to sleepwalking.

**Environmental factors:** Factors such as a noisy or uncomfortable sleep environment can also play a role in sleepwalking episodes.

### Risks and dangers of sleepwalking

While sleepwalking itself is not inherently dangerous, the behaviors exhibited during episodes can pose significant risks. Sleepwalkers are at an increased risk of injury due to falls, collisions, or performing hazardous activities. For example, sleepwalkers may attempt to leave the house, drive a car, or use kitchen appliances, all of which can lead to serious accidents.

In addition to physical risks, sleepwalking can also impact the sleep quality and mental health of both the sleepwalker and their household members. Frequent episodes can lead to disrupted sleep patterns, resulting in daytime sleepiness, impaired cognitive function, and decreased overall well-being.

### Diagnosis and treatment

Diagnosing sleepwalking typically involves a thorough medical history and evaluation by a healthcare professional. In some cases, a sleep study (polysomnography) may be recommended to monitor brain activity, heart rate, and other physiological functions during sleep.

Treatment for sleepwalking depends on the frequency and severity of episodes, as well as the underlying causes. Common approaches include:

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**Improving sleep hygiene:** Establishing a regular sleep schedule, creating a comfortable sleep environment, and avoiding caffeine and alcohol before bedtime can help reduce sleepwalking episodes.

**Stress management:** Techniques such as relaxation exercises, mindfulness, and counseling can help manage stress and anxiety, which may contribute to sleepwalking.

**Medication:** In some cases, medication may be prescribed to reduce the frequency of sleepwalking episodes. Benzodiazepines and antidepressants are commonly used, but they should be taken under the guidance of a healthcare professional.

**Addressing underlying conditions:** Treating any underlying medical conditions, such as sleep apnea or restless legs syndrome, can help alleviate sleepwalking.

**Safety precautions:** Implementing safety measures in the home can help protect sleepwalkers from injury. These may include locking doors and windows, removing sharp objects, and installing gates on stairways.

**Scheduled awakenings:** In some cases, waking the sleepwalker approximately 15-20 minutes before the typical time of their episodes can help disrupt the sleep cycle and prevent sleepwalking.

## Living with sleepwalking

Living with sleepwalking can be challenging, both for the individual and their family members. Communication and understanding are key to managing this condition effectively. Family members should be educated about sleepwalking and trained to respond calmly and safely during episodes. For the sleepwalker, maintaining a consistent sleep routine and addressing any underlying stressors or medical conditions can significantly reduce the occurrence of episodes. Seeking support from healthcare professionals and support groups can also provide valuable resources and coping strategies.

## CONCLUSION

Sleepwalking is a complex sleep disorder that can have significant implications for safety and well-being. Understanding the causes, risks, and management strategies for sleepwalking is essential for minimizing its impact. By implementing effective treatments and safety measures, individuals with sleepwalking and their families can achieve better sleep health and overall quality of life.