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Sexsomnia

You've probably heard stories about unusual things people do during sleep. Walking around the house, eating snacks, and even driving have all been reported. But how about having sex?

It does happen. People with sexsomnia (also called "sleep sex") have been known to masturbate, fondle a partner, engage in oral sex, and even have intercourse while fast asleep. And most have no recollection of these acts when they wake up.

Today we'll take a closer look at sexsomnia, its repercussions, and ways to manage it.

What is sexsomnia?

Sexsomnia can occur at any time during the sleep cycle, but usually happens during the first few hours. Sometimes, it happens more than once during the night. It appears to affect more men than women.

Like sleepwalking, sexsomnia is classified as a parasomnia, which is an umbrella term for abnormal behaviors that take place during sleep. According to the National Sleep Foundation, about 10% of Americans have some type of parasomnia.

The term "sexsomnia" was coined by Canadian researchers, who in 2003 described several cases in *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*. For example:

- While visiting his aunt and uncle, a 16-year-old boy fondled his uncle's testicles while asleep. The boy had a history of sleepwalking and had once downloaded online pornography during sleep as well.
- A 26-year-old man sought treatment because he was having sex with his girlfriend while asleep.
- A man woke up repeatedly during the night because his wife was masturbating.

The study also describes cases involving sexual assault and the sexual touching of children. Sexsomnia is sometimes used as a defense in legal proceedings.

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What are the risk factors?

Experts aren't sure what causes sexsomnia, exactly. But there are some risk factors:

- **Other parasomnias.** Often, people with sexsomnia have other parasomnias. For example, they may sleepwalk or binge eat while sleeping.
- **Family history of parasomnias.** These types of sleep disorders can run in families.
- **Sleep deprivation.** Episodes of sexsomnia may be more frequent when a person needs more sleep.
- **Obstructive sleep apnea.** People with obstructive sleep apnea repeatedly stop breathing for short periods during sleep.
- **Drug and alcohol abuse.** For some, episodes are more likely after the consumption of drugs or alcohol.
- **Side effects of other medications.**

What can be done?

For some couples, sexsomnia isn't a big deal. There are partners who don't mind having their own sleep interrupted for an unexpected rendezvous, even if the initiator won't remember it.

However, sexsomnia usually has a negative impact on partners and other household members, who become sleep deprived when their own sleep patterns are disrupted. Anxiety over sexsomnia, wondering when the next episode will occur, can make it difficult for others to fall asleep or stay asleep. And when sexsomnia leads to assault, the repercussions are much more serious.

Many patients with sexsomnia feel tremendous embarrassment, guilt, and anxiety. They do not intend to act out sexually.

Sometimes, improving sleep hygiene can take care of the situation. Sticking to a sleep schedule by going to bed and waking up at the same time every day is a good first step. It also helps to have a relaxing bedtime ritual that puts you in the right frame of mind for sleep. Getting enough sleep and managing stress and anxiety are also important. On occasion, antidepressants are prescribed for patients with sexsomnia.

If obstructive sleep apnea is the cause, a patient can be fitted with a special device that helps regulate breathing during sleep. This should promote more restorative sleep as well.

If drug and alcohol abuse are involved, appropriate treatment can be considered.

Above all, it's important to consider the safety of others in the household. If there is concern about sexual assault, it might be necessary to lock bedroom doors or use a special alarm system, at least until the problem is under control.

Your Turn

Have you or someone you know ever had an episode of sexsomnia? What happened? How was the situation handled?

Resources

The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry

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(June 2003)

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Libbert, Lauren

“Sexsomnia: It sounds absurd but growing numbers of men claim to suffer from a syndrome that makes them try to have sex while asleep - can it be genuine?”

(October 26, 2011)

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-2053903/Sexsomnia-Growing-numbers-men-claim-suffer-sleep-sex-syndrome.html>

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“Sleep and Parasomnias”

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Cline, John, PhD

“Sexsomnia”

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<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/sleepless-in-america/200902/sexsomnia>

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“‘Sleep Sex’ Unromantic, Even Dangerous”

(2002)

<http://www.webmd.com/sex-relationships/features/sleep-sex-unromantic-even-dangerous>