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Why Am I Having Nightmares? Here Are A Few Sneaky Causes

Many of these triggers and behaviors are common. Here's why they affect your dreams and how to fix them so you get better sleep.

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Have you ever had a long string of nightmares and didn't know what was causing them? It's frustrating.



Nighttime is supposed to be the time to relax and recharge for the next day, and it's hard when your fears and anxieties come with you. We talked to a couple of experts about unexpected culprits, and we have some bad news: Some pretty common, relatable factors (listed below) can trigger nightmares.

But don't worry too much — we'll also cover tips that can help you enjoy your life while decreasing the chance of a nightmare.

Alcohol, recreational drugs, medication and supplements

A night out at the bar can be a lot of fun, but it may not be so great when you're trying to sleep later.

While alcohol can help you sleep deeply at first, "as the blood alcohol level reduces, the reverse happens: There is more shallow sleep and more frequent waking. This can lead to more REM [or rapid eye movement] sleep, which triggers nightmares and vivid dreams," said Phil Lawlor, a sleep expert at the mattress company Dormeo.

Antidepressants and opioids can also increase the frequency of bad dreams.

"While it is not entirely clear why this happens — there's still so much we don't understand about the brain — the increased level of neurotransmitters, such as dopamine, that these substances provide, create changes in the way we dream, often leading to more vivid dreaming and thus more intense nightmares," said Verena Senn, a sleep expert with Emma Sleep who has researched sleep and the brain for almost 15 years. Melatonin, a supplement that can help you fall asleep, can also cause bad dreams. (You just can't win, it seems!)

"There is no conclusive evidence as to how melatonin affects our dreams; however, there are connections to high levels of melatonin causing nightmares because you are less likely to leave enough of the transition time between being awake and being asleep," Lawlor explained.

The fix: You can still have that glass of wine at night (if that's healthy for you otherwise). Just drink it at least four hours before bed, according to Lawlor. Addressing the medication and supplement side is a little harder since you may need those things to function. Ultimately, talk to your doctor.