

BEDWETTING IN CHILDREN: A MEDIA BACKGROUNDER

Bedwetting in children: a medical condition

Nocturnal enuresis is the medical term for bedwetting in children. It is defined as “involuntary urination during sleep, occurring in children over five years of age and in the absence of any central nervous system defect”.¹

Primary nocturnal enuresis (PNE) occurs in children who have never achieved consistent night-time dryness, whereas, secondary nocturnal enuresis (SNE) occurs in children who have previously been dry for at least six months.

Bedwetting in children older than five years is not a trivial condition and requires proper evaluation and treatment.² Yet, four out of five parents are unaware that children who wet their beds may be suffering from a medical condition and almost half ignore the problem in the hope that it will go away. Nearly a third of parents delay doing anything until the child is wetting the bed at least five times a week. In fact, bedwetting can persist into adulthood.³ One in ten children will wet the bed for life. Research also suggests that bedwetting in children could be a strong indicator of future nocturia, the medical term for the complaint of needing to wake one or more times to pass urine at night.³ Bedwetting and nocturia can be treated effectively.^{4,5,6}

What’s the impact of bedwetting?

Bedwetting can be very distressing for both children and their parents. Children with the condition tend to feel a sense of shame, often isolating themselves and avoiding social situations.^{7,8} In addition, they may experience bullying and feelings of low self-esteem at an age when an intact self-image is extremely important for the optimal development of their personality.^{7,8}

Parents frequently feel embarrassed of their child’s bedwetting and can find the extra laundry both stressful and expensive.⁹ Lack of knowledge about the condition can cause parents to be intolerant and irritable, causing the child to feel a further sense of failure and shame.^{10,11}

More than half of parents do not allow their children to spend nights away from home, so children who wet the bed frequently miss out on social activities such as sleepovers at friends’ houses and school trips.

Timely and consistent treatment can prevent psychological impairment, enabling normal childhood development, as well as bringing practical relief to the family.

How common is bedwetting?

Bedwetting is very common; it decreases with age, and has remarkably similar prevalence rates across the world.¹² The condition is more common in boys than girls.¹³

Across Europe, more than five million children wet the bed.¹⁴ In the UK, it is the most common chronic condition in children after asthma, affecting more than half a million five to 16 year-olds.¹⁵ Nocturnal enuresis continues to affect young people moving into adulthood with one in 75 young people aged 15-21 still being affected.¹⁶

A study in Hong Kong defined bedwetting as one or more wet night over a three month period and found a prevalence of 16.1% at age five years, 10.1% at seven years and 2.2% at 19 years.¹⁷ The study also found that amongst young adults aged 16-40 years there is a prevalence rate of 1.00-1.5%.¹⁷

What causes bedwetting?

The causes of bedwetting are not fully understood.¹⁸ Mistakenly, 80 percent of parents believe that stress and worry are the major causes of their child's bedwetting.²

In fact, bedwetting is best considered as a symptom that may result from a combination of different predisposing factors, classified as:¹⁹

1. Sleep arousal difficulties – a reduced ability to wake to noise or to bladder contractions
2. Nocturnal polyuria – the production of an abnormally large volume of urine during sleep: >20% of total daily output for young people, > 33% of daily output for elderly people
3. Bladder dysfunction – most commonly either a small bladder capacity or overactive bladder

There is often a strong family history of bedwetting, with nearly two thirds of children who wet the bed having one or two parents with a history of the condition.²⁰

What should parents do if their child regularly wets the bed?

Parents of children who wet the bed should consult their doctor to discuss possible causes and treatment. The International Children's Continence Society (ICCS) recommend that the first step in treating bedwetting is to receive advice from a primary care physician or specialist nurse, followed by the use of bedwetting alarm and / or taking the medication desmopressin.²¹

In the UK, in addition to dialogue with healthcare professionals, NICE guidelines also suggest that treatment with desmopressin should be considered if rapid onset and/or short-term improvement in bedwetting is the priority of treatment or an alarm is inappropriate.²²

Studies have shown that long-term treatment with desmopressin is effective and well tolerated which can aid long term improvements in nocturnal dryness when associated with other treatment factors.^{5,6}

<p>This document is designed for use proactively with accredited healthcare journalists, and reactively in the event of any queries from consumer / consumer health journalists.</p>
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