

View this article online at: [patient.info/news-and-features/why-does-pregnancy-cause-nightmares-and-vivid-dreams](https://patient.info/news-and-features/why-does-pregnancy-cause-nightmares-and-vivid-dreams)

## Why can pregnancy cause nightmares and vivid dreams?

People love to tell pregnant women how their sleep will change after they've had their baby, but for many, pregnancy can disturb their rest long before birth. Studies suggest lots of expectant women have vivid dreams or nightmares during pregnancy, particularly in the third trimester. But why?

### Why pregnancy can cause strange dreams and nightmares

If you've experienced an increase in bizarre [pregnancy](#) dreams, you're not alone. According to a 2016 study published in the journal [BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth](#), women report more frequent nightmares during pregnancy, many of which have to do with childbirth or danger to the newborn baby. Researchers surveyed 406 [pregnant](#) women to find that they reported nightmares more than twice as often as women who were not pregnant. Often, the nightmares were baby-related.

Another study, published in 2014 in the journal [Sleep Medicine](#), surveyed 57 pregnant women who were in the last trimester of their pregnancies. Of those polled, 32% described having weekly [nightmares](#) and 21% reported more than one pregnancy nightmare per week.

#### Interrupted sleep

Most dreams are believed to occur during rapid eye movement (REM) [sleep](#), a restorative phase of sleep thought to play a role in learning, [memory](#) and mood. Pregnancy triggers changes in hormones, your [sleep pattern](#) and emotions, which may impact your dreams and how well you remember them.

Disrupted sleep is another factor that can impact how we [remember dreams](#), or how vivid they feel when we wake up. Frequent sleep disruption increases the likelihood of waking up during the REM stage of the sleep cycle, which can make [dreams](#) seem more memorable and instantaneous.

Sleep is often already broken during pregnancy and [insomnia](#) can occur during all stages of pregnancy. This can be due to [stress](#), discomfort, an inability to move or turn over easily in bed and the need to urinate more frequently. [Restless legs syndrome](#) is another condition which often starts in pregnancy, and which causes an intense urge to move the legs (predominantly at night), which can interrupt sleep.

### **Impact of stress**

Dr Emma Haynes, psychotherapist and spokesperson for the [UK Council for Psychotherapy](#), says there are many reasons why we may experience disturbing pregnancy dreams.

"Throughout pregnancy women can feel stressed and anxious. Close to the baby's [birth](#), stress and anxiety can escalate to a level that may feel overwhelming," she says. "Existential aspects such as fear of the unknown – even in second or third pregnancies – may bring up fears about birth, how to cope with the pain of [childbirth](#), and whether the baby will be healthy.

"This may cause a woman to experience dreams about the baby, particularly close to birth," Haynes adds. "There seems to be some relation to daytime stress and dreams or nightmares, and this makes absolute sense."

Additionally, [research](#) suggests that worry and the negative emotions associated with it not only increase the likelihood of nightmares but their severity too. This can be distressing and impact women during the day too, as they may be more likely to reflect on their dreams when awake.

### **Anxiety can feel more intense at night**

[Anxiety](#) can affect us at any time of day, but it can often feel much worse in the quiet of the [night](#). The brain doesn't 'switch off' during sleep, so worries or anxieties may crop up in our unconscious brains as we sleep. If we wake up at night and start to worry about something, it's possible to experience stressful dreams when we do eventually fall back to [sleep](#).

"Fears seem to multiply at night, and if we try to go to sleep when anxious or stressed, the chances are our sleep may well be poor," says Haynes. "If the woman is especially anxious, these dreams may turn into nightmares, which can cause a woman to shout out, or thrash about in her sleep."

### **Fears about birth and the aftermath**

Unsurprisingly, many women worry about how they will cope with [labour](#) and childbirth during pregnancy. These fears can become more intense in the third trimester, as the anticipation begins to build. However, it's also common for new parents to feel anxious about how they will cope after giving birth.

Women may worry about feeling isolated or a lack of a family support system. [Studies](#) show it's common for women to worry about losing their identity as they adapt to the idea of being a mother. [Research](#) suggests intense negative emotions can have a serious impact on the content of our pregnancy dreams.

### **Impact on maternal mental health**

[One in five women](#) are estimated to struggle with their [mental health in pregnancy](#), but stigma remains a problem. Often, women are deterred from seeking psychological support because they're afraid of being judged or deemed a bad mother. As a result, problems such as anxiety and depression can go unchecked.

Experiencing nightmares and disturbed sleep can exacerbate mental health problems, even after the baby is born. In fact, [studies](#) have suggested [insomnia](#) during pregnancy may be linked to postnatal depression.

"Dreams and nightmares can cause a spiral in mental health issues. Pregnancy evokes fear, uncertainty, anxiety and stress. Dreams can feed into these, as women can imagine that the dream may mean something about the baby," says Haynes.

"In turn, this may escalate fear and daytime rumination, which disrupts and disturbs [sleep](#) and can exacerbate mental health problems. Sleep is an important part of mental well-being."

# How to cope with vivid dreams and pregnancy nightmares

## Speak to your GP or midwife

If you are struggling with [anxiety](#), [depression](#) or any other mental health problem in pregnancy, it's important to speak to your doctor, midwife or health visitor. They will be able to advise on the best course of action for you. You can also [self-refer for talking therapy](#) on the NHS.

## Try therapy

"[Psychotherapy](#) can really help as it directly addresses the cause of the anxiety and fear and will help women to gently confront and challenge these causes," says Haynes.

"Therapy also offers the gaze of another on the situation – someone who can help the woman to learn strategies to cope with her emotions, and can help them feel less isolated and listened to," she adds. "Safety and security are areas I would always address, as often prior difficulties can be re-evoked close to birth and the transition into motherhood."

## Improve your bedtime routine

Making small changes to your evening routine may also help improve the quality of your sleep in general. There are lots of steps that can help manage [sleep problems](#), from creating an evening routine to avoiding screens and going to bed at the same time each night. Baths, breathing exercises or reading can help you [relax](#) before going to sleep.

## Talk to people you trust

If you're feeling anxious or low, it's important to speak to friends and family about how you feel. Pregnancy can be an incredibly difficult period and it's common to experience anxiety, [stress](#) or mood problems. [Antenatal groups](#) are a good place to meet and chat with other expectant parents who may well be feeling the same.

## Nap during the day

Pregnancy [insomnia](#) can be exhausting, so it's important to get some rest while you can. Napping during the day can be a good way to recharge if you're struggling to sleep at night.

**Disclaimer:** This article is for information only and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions. Egton Medical Information Systems Limited has used all reasonable care in compiling the information but makes no warranty as to its accuracy. Consult a doctor or other healthcare professional for diagnosis and treatment of medical conditions. For details see our [conditions](#).

<b>Last updated by:</b> Lydia Smith 08/02/2022	
<b>Peer reviewed by:</b> Dr Sarah Jarvis MBE, FRCGP 08/02/2022	

View this article online at: [patient.info/news-and-features/why-does-pregnancy-cause-nightmares-and-vivid-dreams](https://patient.info/news-and-features/why-does-pregnancy-cause-nightmares-and-vivid-dreams)

Discuss Why can pregnancy cause nightmares and vivid dreams? and find more trusted resources at [Patient](#).



To find out more visit [www.patientaccess.com](https://www.patientaccess.com)  
or download the app



Follow us

