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Toddlers' sleep, eating problems often go together

Researchers recommend routines and guidelines to help solve sleeping and feeding troubles in toddlers.

By Reuters

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NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Parents who have a hard time getting their babies and toddlers to sleep at night may also often have trouble at mealtime, new study findings suggest.

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So-called behavioral insomnia, where a young child regularly resists bedtime or has trouble staying asleep, is common — seen in up to 30 percent of children between the ages of 6 months and 3 years.

Asimilar percentage have problems at mealtime, ranging from being an overly "fussy" eater to having a full-fledged "feeding disorder" in which, for instance, parents can't get their child to follow any regular eating schedule, or the food refusal affects a child's weight.

It might not be surprising to many parents that sleeping and eating issues often go hand-in-hand. But the new study, published in the journal Pediatrics, is the first to show this may be true.

Among parents of 681 healthy kids 6 months to 3 years old,

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Israeli researchers found that those whose child had behavioral insomnia were more likely than other parents to say their child had eating issues as well.

And parents whose children were diagnosed with a feeding disorder were more likely to say they had trouble getting their child to sleep at night.

When asked if mealtime was a "problem," one-quarter of parents of children with insomnia said that it was; that compared with nine percent of other parents.

Similarly, 37 percent of parents whose children had an eating problem said that sleep was also an issue. In contrast, only 16 percent of other parents said the same.

Young children's eating and sleeping habits are the two most common concerns parents bring to their pediatricians, write the researchers, led by Dr. Riva Tauman of Tel Aviv Medical Center.

The current findings, they say, suggest that doctors should be aware that the two issues commonly go together, and help parents find ways to manage both.

The standard way to address behavioral insomnia is for parents to change their children's nighttime routine. That usually means setting a regular bedtime and certain rituals, like reading a story, that let a young child know bedtime is coming.

With eating problems, experts generally suggest that parents try to get kids interested in mealtime from an early age — gradually introducing a variety of healthy, colorful foods, for instance, and making the eating environment pleasant but without any distractions like TV.

The current findings are based on 58 children who had been diagnosed with behavioral insomnia, 76 with a feeding disorder, and 547 who were studied for comparison.

Parents of children with insomnia were more likely to also report feeding "problems" — worrying, for example, that their child was not eating enough or not growing properly.

Similarly, parents of children with feeding disorders were often worried about their child's sleep; and compared with other parents, they reported that their children got to bed almost an hour later, and slept for fewer hours each night.

It's possible, according to Tauman's team, that parents of young children with feeding disorders are more sensitive to sleep issues — and vice-versa.

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But they say it's also likely that parenting practices, like a lack of consistency in enforcing rules, underlie both problems.

On the positive side, the researchers note, that means that getting help for one issue could help parents manage both.

On the Web: [Pediatrics](#), online March 3, 2011.

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