

Sleeping with a night light on

Question

Will a light help my child sleep better at night?



Answer

Leaving a light on at night can have a detrimental effect on children's health. Even low levels of light can lead to difficulties in getting to sleep and more waking up in the night, especially between 2am and 4am.

Research shows that babies and children who sleep with the light on are five times more likely to grow up short sighted than children who sleep in the dark. A night light can promote eye growth, which increases the risk of short-sightedness (myopia) even when the child is asleep. Children under the age of two are most at risk from developing the condition.

A night light in the child's room can adversely affects the chemical balance and structure of the brain and result in reduced capacity to produce melatonin which may be one of the reasons for the steady rise in childhood leukaemia. Department of Health figures show that the numbers of children aged five or under diagnosed with leukaemia has increased by 50% in the past 40 years.

In the dark, production of the hormone melatonin increases the ability to fall asleep and stay asleep. Leaving a light on prevents the body from making the hormone efficiently. Melatonin release is dependent on the light-dark cycle (circadian cycle), which regulates the body's internal clock. Disruption of the circadian cycle increases lethargy, irritability and tiredness and reduces concentration and mental ability during the day. Chronic disruption of the circadian cycle also increases the risk of certain cancers in later life.

For children with anxiety problems, going to sleep in the dark can be very disturbing. However, in view of the protective benefits of melatonin, it is well worth encouraging children to sleep in total darkness.

A night light provides comfort and security, but turning it off gradually using a dimmer switch can help children adjust to the dark.