

Head Banging and Body Rocking

What are head banging and body rocking?

Head banging and body rocking are called rhythmic movement disorders. Rhythmic movement disorders usually involve some type of rocking, rolling or head banging. Oddly, children find this a soothing way to fall asleep. Your child probably does this most times they are falling asleep, whether at naptime or bedtime. Because all children naturally wake often during the night, your child will need to head bang (or rock) to put himself back to sleep in the middle of the night. So, don't be surprised that this behavior happens not only at the start of bedtime but throughout the night.

Should I be concerned about my child's head banging or body rocking?

For almost all children, head banging or body rocking is of no concern. It is a common way to fall asleep and usually children outgrow this behavior as they grow older. In some rare cases children may hurt themselves, in particular children with developmental delay, autism or blindness can be at higher risk of injury. If your child snores or has another sleep disorder, these may contribute to worsening the rhythmic movements through the night. In these cases your child may need further evaluation by a sleep specialist or have a sleep study.

How should I respond to my child's head banging or body rocking?

There is nothing much that you need to do if your child head bangs or rocks himself to sleep. There are some things to consider:

- **Don't worry about trying to protect your child.** Even if your child is banging their head hard, it is unlikely they will hurt themselves. Do not put any bumpers on the crib or place pillows in strategic places. Also, it rarely works. Most children will find a way to bang their heads, no matter what creative tricks you try.
- **Be careful not to reinforce the head banging.** If you go in to your child every time they start to rock or bang their head, you may be reinforcing the behavior without even realizing it. They may be head banging to get your attention. Make sure that your child gets lots of attention during the day and ignore their head banging at night.
- **Move the crib or bed.** Move the crib or bed away from the wall if the banging or rocking is making noise and keeping the rest of the family awake. If your child is in a bed rather than a crib, put guardrails on all sides so they won't fall out of bed. If your child is making their crib or bed squeak, oil the screws and bolts.

To Learn More

- Sleep Disorders Center
206-987-5072
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

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- **Ensure your child's safety.** Be sure to tighten all screw and bolts on your child's crib or bed on a regular basis, as the rocking or head banging can loosen them.
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Seattle Children's offers interpreter services for Deaf, hard of hearing or non-English speaking patients, family members and legal representatives free of charge. Seattle Children's will make this information available in alternate formats upon request. Call the Family Resource Center at 206-987-2201. This handout has been reviewed by clinical staff at Seattle Children's. However, your child's needs are unique. Before you act or rely upon this information, please talk with your child's healthcare provider.

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