

'Sleep disorders prevalent among autistic children'

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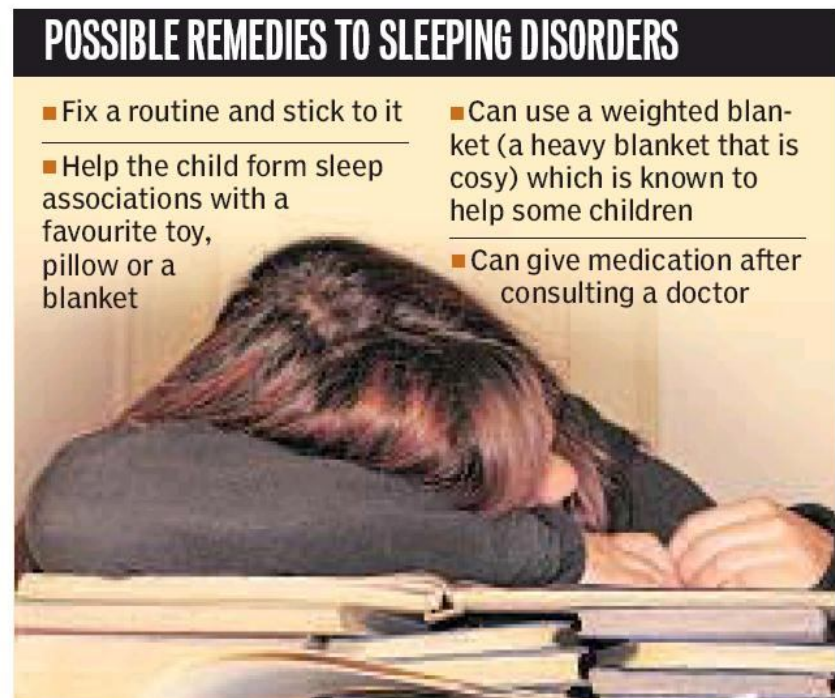
MUMBAI: Ayana Monis, 3, can be seen opening and closing the drawers of a cupboard in the bedroom at 2am while her mother, Shweta, tries to sleep.

Ayana, who is autistic, often plays by herself in the dark and likes looking out of the window in the night. "I am now used to snoozing while she is playing. She eventually gets tired and sleeps at about 6am," said Shweta, a Malad resident.

Doctors who treat autistic children said that there is a high prevalence of sleep disorders among their patients. Autism spectrum disorders are developmental brain disorders. These could include a wide range of symptoms such as difficulty in social communication, expressing emotions or obsessive behaviour traits. Some children are mildly impaired by their symptoms, while others are severely disabled.

An ongoing study that started last year at Jaslok Hospital with nine autistic children in the age group of three to eight years has shown that there is a strong association between sleep disorders and autism. Of the nine children, seven suffered from sleep disturbances such as bed-wetting, insomnia and disturbed sleep among others.

The study done by Dr Preeti Devnani also included a detailed polysomnography of these chil-



POSSIBLE REMEDIES TO SLEEPING DISORDERS

- Fix a routine and stick to it
- Help the child form sleep associations with a favourite toy, pillow or a blanket
- Can use a weighted blanket (a heavy blanket that is cosy) which is known to help some children
- Can give medication after consulting a doctor

dren where their sleep pattern was studied all night. Polysomnography measures rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, snoring episodes, leg movement, airflow and choking. Last month, Dr Devnani presented the study at a conference at the American Academy of Sleep Medicine, Boston.

"We found that higher the spectrum of autism, the more the sleep disturbance. These children also had less REM sleep or active sleep or deep sleep. REM sleep helps form memory," said Dr Devnani, who runs a sleep disorder clinic at Jaslok Hospital.

"Many parents also suffer a lot after a stressful day with children who have to be given

occupational and other forms of therapy," said Dr Samir Dalwai, a developmental paediatrician, who runs New Horizons Child Development Centre at Goregaon, which treats autistic children including Ayana.

Autistic children do not respond to stimuli such as day and night and follow their own pattern of behaviour. "These children do not follow the schedules that other children follow. Some are hyperactive and refuse to sleep," said Dr Malay Dave, consultant psychiatrist who practices at Ghatkopar.

Dr Devnani said it was important to be aware of sleep disorders in these children and treat them.