

Sleeping Disorders



I toss and turn for hours on end, No matter what I do, I just can't get to sleep.

I never feel like I have had enough sleep, I sleep lightly and seem to drift in and out of sleep.

I wake up every two or three hours before I need to get up and just lie there not able to sleep.

I have no trouble sleeping. In fact I sleep way too much but still feel tired.

These are comments made by people who suffer with different kinds of sleep problems.

This guide aims to help to understand your sleep problem and learn some simple ways to sleep better.

Understanding sleep and sleeping problems

Sleep problems are very common and are often referred to as insomnia. One study in America found that only 5% of adults reported never having trouble sleeping.

A recent study found that as many as 30% of the adult population are affected by sleep problems. Sleep difficulties are particularly common in women, children and those over 65. In fact, roughly half of the elderly population complains of insomnia. Therefore to have trouble sleeping at some point in your life is quite normal.

How much sleep do we need?

People can become very distressed when they feel they are not getting a good night's sleep, which can then make it harder to get off to sleep.

But what is a normal amount of sleep? How much sleep do we need?



The answer is that people vary greatly in their need for sleep. There is a popular idea that we all need 7 to 8 hours sleep every night. This is not true. Although for an adult 7-9 hours is recommended, many studies have shown that people can range between needing 6-10 hours a night. Also the amount of sleep a person needs varies throughout their life.

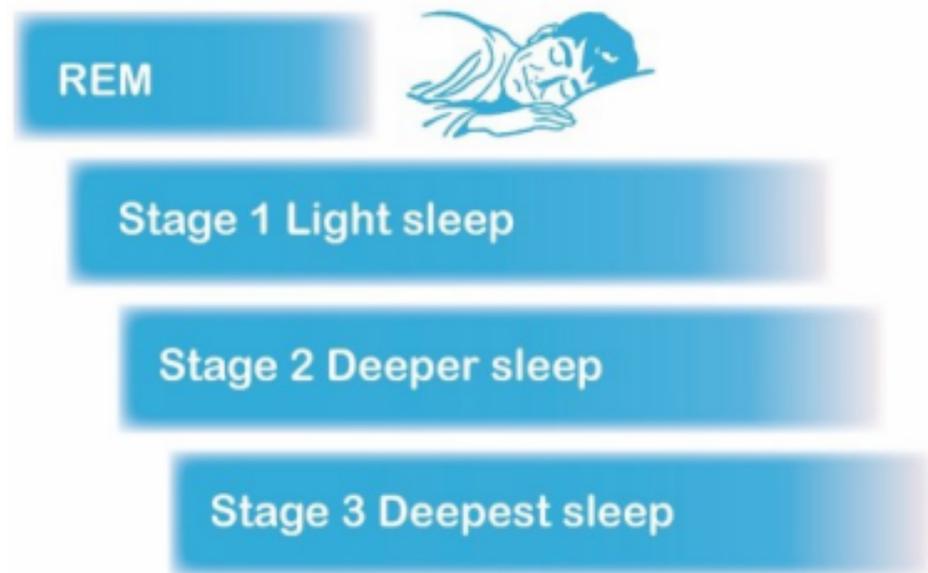
How much sleep do we need?

For example, a newborn baby spends 14 to 17 hours sleeping per day. As children grow older they require less sleep, possibly 11-14 hours as a toddler and maybe 8 to 10 hours as a teenager. Older adults, aged 65 and over, usually need slightly less sleep, but the recommendation is still around 7-8 hours.

Not only does the need for sleep vary from person to person, and with age, it also varies depending on level of activity. For example, if someone has retired from work, they may be less active and therefore require less sleep. On the other hand, if they do lots of mental and/or physical activity, then they may require quite a bit of sleep. Basically, if you awake refreshed and get through the day without feeling tired then you are probably getting the right amount of sleep for you.

Are there different sorts of sleep?

Sleep is not like a light bulb which is either on or off, but has different stages, varying from light to deep sleep. There are two main types of sleep. Broadly, sleep is divided into what is called Rapid Eye Movement (REM) and non-REM (NREM) sleep. REM sleep occurs several times during the night and is where most dreaming is thought to take place. Non-REM sleep is divided into three stages, each stage being a bit deeper, almost like a staircase of sleep.



Are there different sorts of sleep?

During the night whilst asleep, people go up and down this staircase many times and in fact wake up several times. We may not remember these brief wakening's but it is entirely normal to wake about every 90 minutes or so.

On a typical night an adult who sleeps well will spend about 20% in REM sleep, 5% in Stage 1, 50% in Stage 2, and 25% in stage 3.

As with the amount of sleep we need, the sort of sleep we have changes as we get older. Sleep in older people tends to be lighter, with more frequent wakening. This is normal and nothing to worry about. For a typical person aged 70, deep sleep takes up less than 10% of the night's sleep. Therefore, an older person may report waking more times in the night.

Are there other changes in sleep patterns?

Not only does our sleep become lighter with more awakenings as we get older, but our pattern of when we sleep often changes too. It becomes more likely that we go to bed sooner, wake up earlier or drop off to sleep during the day, so our natural rhythm of sleep can be disturbed.

What causes sleep problems?

There are a number of reasons why sleep problems can develop:

1. Effects of ageing

As mentioned, when people get older they tend to sleep less deeply and may also sleep less well at night. Sometimes people will then tend to drop off to sleep during the day which again reduces the need for sleep at night. This in itself is not a problem, but often not sleeping at night becomes a great cause for worry, frustration and concern, which in turn leads to sleeping less well.

What causes sleep problems?

2. Medical reasons for disrupted sleep

There are many health related reasons for poor sleep which may or may not be to do with getting older.

- Needing to go to the toilet at night. The need to go to the toilet during the night occurs more in later life. About 60% of women and about 70% of men, aged over 65 get out of bed at least once a night to go to the toilet. This can also happen for other reasons of course, such as pregnancy. Getting out of bed at night isn't always a huge problem, but can be frustrating if it is difficult to get back to sleep.
- Another common medical reason for poor sleep is pain. This again can be common in older age with joint problems such as arthritis.

What causes sleep problems?

2. Medical reasons for disrupted sleep

- Many women report disturbed sleep around the menopause, often related to hot flushes. Difficulty sleeping often remains, and generally, post-menopausal women are less satisfied with their sleep with as many as 61% reporting insomnia symptoms.
- Other health problems can also affect sleep, for example breathing difficulties or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).
- Depression and low mood can affect sleep. Disturbed sleep is a common symptom of depression. It is quite usual for a depressed person to wake up early morning and be unable to get back to sleep, or to have difficulty getting to sleep.

What causes sleep problems?

2. Medical reasons for disrupted sleep

- Obstructive sleep apnoea is a treatable condition present in around 5% of women and 10% of men most commonly in middle age. People often don't know they have it, but if someone snores and breathes loudly with pausing and gasping, then sleep apnoea may be the problem. It is more common in overweight people and in people who smoke or drink alcohol.
- Restless legs syndrome is present in about 5% of the population and people with this have an urge to move their legs and find it really hard to keep their legs still in the last hour of the evening or getting into bed at night. This can also be made worse by some medicines.

What causes sleep problems?

3. Stress, worry and anxiety

- When someone is stressed and anxious they may often find it hard to get off to sleep, with their mind full of worries and their body tense.

4. Surroundings

Our surroundings can make a big difference to how we sleep. For example, a bedroom that is over hot or over cold, a bed that is too hard or too soft, a room that is too noisy or too light can all make a difference to how well someone sleeps. Sleeping in a strange place can also affect someone's sleep.

What causes sleep problems?

5. Bereavement

- The emotional upset of bereavement or other trauma can affect sleep. Nightmares and upsetting memories are common.

6. Disrupted sleep routine

- People who work shifts which change frequently often have disrupted sleep. This gets worse with age and is affected by lifestyle factors such as smoking and drinking alcohol.

Sometimes it may be a combination of a few different causes, rather than just one thing. But it is helpful to know what is causing your sleep problem, as this may help you find a solution.

What sort of sleep problem do you have?

Tick the boxes that apply to you:

Getting to sleep

For some people it can take hours but once they are asleep the quality of sleep is good.

Staying asleep

Frequent waking in the middle of the night and difficulty getting back to sleep.

Waking to early

Waking earlier than desired with difficulty getting back to sleep.

What sort of sleep problem do you have?

Tick the boxes that apply to you:

Poor sleep quality

Sleeping lightly, with restless, disturbed and inconsistent sleep.

Sleeping too much

Sleeping too much, often feeling sleepy and dozing during the day.

You may have a mixture of these but knowing a bit more about what sort of sleep problem you have can help when it comes to trying to deal with it. Keeping a sleep diary to look for patterns in your sleep can be very helpful.

Summary

Sleep problems are very common and affect people in different ways. There is no “right” amount of sleep as this varies between people and across the life-span. Sleep problems can occur for a number of reasons: as a result of age; medical reasons; emotional reasons; unhelpful surroundings; disrupted sleep routines. There are different sorts of sleep problems. It is also possible to think you have a sleep problem when in fact you are still getting enough sleep but it is different from what you expect.

Overcoming your sleep problem

One of the first steps in overcoming sleep difficulties is finding out any possible causes and trying to look for solutions.

Is sleeping your main problem, or is there another problem which may be causing you to have difficulty sleeping?

If there is another problem, is there anything you can do about that problem?

Review these common reasons for insomnia and try to work out which if any apply. There may be different solutions for different problems.



Problem

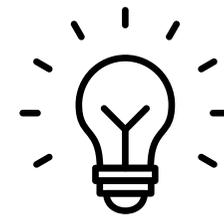


Worrying about not getting enough sleep – are you expecting too much sleep and worrying about not getting enough? Sometimes people lie in bed and worry about not sleeping.

As we have already mentioned, worrying about not getting enough sleep makes matters worse. Thoughts such as “I’ll be exhausted tomorrow”, “I’ll never get to sleep”, “I must sleep, it’s ruining my health”, may run through your mind. The effect of this is that you feel tense and anxious and less likely to drop off to sleep, which in turn leads to more worrying thoughts.



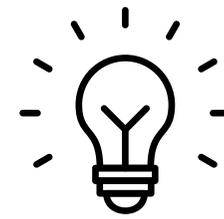
Solution



Try to find ways to relax and clear your mind, you will always fall asleep eventually. Lying calm and relaxed in bed can be pleasant if your mind is cleared of worrying thoughts about not getting enough sleep. Don't keep looking to see what the time is. Try to put sleep out of your mind. Have a daydream instead about something pleasant such as somewhere you have enjoyed a relaxing holiday. Bring the picture in to your mind as vividly as you can, remembering all the sights, sounds and smells. You can also focus on your breathing, breathing in deeply through your nose, and making sure you have a nice long out breath.



Solution



Use your breathing as an anchor, so if your thoughts wander off you simply bring your mind back by focusing on your breathing. Progressive muscle relaxation can also be helpful. This can be done by gently tensing and relaxing the main muscle groups in the body every 10 seconds and focusing your attention on the relaxed feeling as it begins to spread through your body.

Check out our audio resources for further support with this:

- Breathing to activate your soothing system
- Progressive muscle relaxation



Problem



Needing to go to the toilet in the night – are you up several times in the night needing to empty your bladder?



Solution



- If you have to go to the toilet several times in the night, there may be a medical reason for this and the solutions will depend on what is causing the problem. Bladder retraining can be useful, as can restricting caffeine intake and fluid late at night, however medical advice should be sought if this is a problem.



Problem



Are you in a lot of pain and does this wake you up or stop you getting off to sleep?



Solution



- Progressive muscle relaxation can help with pain, as being tense can make pain worse. It may be helpful to speak to your GP about your pain as there may be a treatment that can help.

Check out our audio resource on progressive muscle relaxation.



Problem



Loss and bereavement – have you experienced a loss or bereavement recently?



Solution



It is very common to have disturbed sleep following bereavement. Try not to add to your difficulties by worrying about not sleeping. Your sleep pattern should return to normal in time. The relaxation techniques described in this guide may help. Talking about your feelings may also help, either to a friend, counsellor or to your GP.

See our self help guide on bereavement.



Problem



Anxiety, depression, stress – are you suffering from stress at the moment? Or are you depressed or anxious? If so, then your sleeping is probably affected. It may be that as soon as your head hits the pillow your mind starts working overtime thinking about problems such as work, relationships and money worries.



Solution



The following might help. If your mind starts to race, try to use the relaxation techniques described earlier, such as progressive muscle relaxation, or by focusing on a relaxing image or on your breathing. By making your breathing deeper and slower, this can decrease your heart rate which in turn reduces cortisol, one of the hormones released when we are anxious. If you notice your mind starting to worry again, try saying to yourself 'I will deal with this tomorrow' and bring your focus back to your breathing. Basically anxious, worrying thoughts will keep us awake, and calming, happy thoughts will help us sleep.

Jotting down a few things we are grateful for before bedtime each night has been found to be helpful in getting a good night's sleep.



Solution



If worry is a big problem for you, it may be helpful to set aside 30 minutes a day 'worry time'. Take a pencil and pad and write down everything that is worrying you. It is best to do this somewhere other than your bedroom. Taking each problem in turn, ask yourself if there is anything you can do to solve the problem? If no, score the problem out and move on to the next problem. If yes, write down every possible solution you can think of. Choose the most helpful solution and write down all the steps you are going to need to take. Write as much as you can. Write down any obstacles and how you might tackle them. Make a plan for when you are going to deal with the problem.



Solution



Whenever you find yourself worrying, remind yourself to save it till your next 'worry time'. Sometimes if worrying thoughts pop in to your head at night just asking yourself 'is there anything I can do about this?' No? Then let it go. Yes? Jot it quickly down and tell yourself you will deal with it tomorrow.

Check out our self help guide on anxiety and depression.



Problem



Do you suffer with restless legs syndrome?



Solution



Mild restless legs syndrome that isn't linked to an underlying health condition can be managed with just a few lifestyle changes. Avoiding stimulants such as caffeine, and decreasing alcohol in the evenings; stopping smoking; taking regular daily exercise, but not just before bedtime; and having good sleep habits. Symptoms may be relieved by: massaging your legs; taking a cool shower in the evening; walking and stretching; distraction and relaxation exercises. If symptoms are more severe, medication may be needed and you should see your GP. Restless legs caused by an underlying health condition can often be cured by treating that condition. For example, anaemia may cause restless legs, and this may be treated by iron tablets.

Good sleep habits

You may find that getting help in another area has a knock-on effect on your sleeping. Your sleeping may well right itself if you can solve some of your other problems. Even so, you may have got into some “bad habits” which are not helping you get off to sleep. Many people have bad sleep habits and may get away with it for most of their life. Having a cigarette last thing at night may not always affect sleep. Lying in bed reading for hours, watching TV and drinking coffee may be fine for some people some of the time.

Good sleep habits

When a sleep problem starts, it is most helpful to try and get rid of any bad sleep habits we may have built up over the years. The following simple checklist of good sleep habits may help.



Don't worry

Try not to worry about sleep – it may be that you are getting enough, but it's just less than you expect.

Don't take naps during the day to catch up if you can help it, this will affect your natural rhythm and only add to your problem. Remember that the amount of sleep we get is an individual thing and may change throughout our life.

Good sleep habits



Surroundings

Go through this basic check list and see whether there are any simple changes you can make:

Noise - is your sleep disturbed by noise either in or outside your room? Earplugs may help.

Light - is your room too light? Are electronic devices emitting light? Blackout blinds or an eye-mask may help.

Temperature of room (too hot, too cold?)

Wearing socks, electric blanket, hot water bottle, can all help.

Is your partner keeping you awake?

Earplugs or spare room may help.

Good sleep habits

Food and drink

Anything that contains caffeine, can reduce the quality of sleep. Examples include coffee, tea, hot chocolate and cola. It is best not to have any of these things within six hours of bedtime. If you are having a bedtime drink try to make sure it is decaffeinated. There is some evidence that having a malty drink at bedtime can increase length of sleep and reduce broken sleep.

Good sleep habits



Cigarettes

Smoking last thing at night can keep you awake as nicotine is a stimulant. If you do smoke, try to have your last cigarette at least four hours before bedtime. Nicotine patches or chewing gum could also affect sleep.



Alcohol

People often feel sleepy after drinking a lot of alcohol, but alcohol affects your quality of sleep. It is best to avoid drinking large amounts of alcohol close to bedtime if you are having sleep problems.

Good sleep habits



Medicines and other drugs

Some drugs can affect sleep because they are stimulants. If you are taking medicine it is worth checking with your pharmacist or doctor. Examples are certain drugs for asthma and for migraine. Sleeping tablets, whilst they can help in the short term often cause sleep problems as they interfere with the quality of sleep and can alter sleep patterns. They should only be taken for short periods.



Activity

Gradually increase your daytime activity and exercise, but don't exercise too near to bedtime.

Good sleep habits



Consistency

Try to get a consistent timetable so that your body knows where it is. Getting up at the same time each day is much better during insomnia than trying to catch up on lost sleep or going to bed early or napping at odd times during the day. It is better to go to bed feeling sleepy rather than too early in an attempt to try and catch up. If you feel the need to sleep in at weekends try to make it not more than an hour later than usual.



Tiredness

This may seem obvious but do not go to bed until you feel sleepy.

Good sleep habits



Electronic devices

Avoid using electronic devices (TVs, gaming machines and more importantly, tablets and smartphones) in the bedroom. Blue light emitting from these gadgets stimulates the brain and inhibits melatonin production – the hormone that helps you sleep.



Pre-sleep routine

Try to use the hour before going to bed to unwind and prepare for sleep. Dim the lights, listen to some calming music. It is helpful to get into a pattern.

Good sleep habits



Get up

If you have not fallen asleep within 20 minutes – get up. Don't lie in bed feeling tense. Listen to relaxing music, read a relaxing book or watch something boring on TV until you feel sleepy. Some people find that having a warm milky or malty drink can help.



Bed for sleep

Make sure your bed is associated with sleep. For example, don't watch TV, eat, and talk on the telephone in bed. The only exception to this is sex which can in fact help with sleep.

These simple guidelines really can improve your sleep but they take time. Please be patient, your hard work will pay off although it can take many weeks to develop new sleep habits.

Do

- Get up at a regular time
- Have a bedtime routine
- Get up if you're worrying
- Exercise regularly, not late in the evening
- Remember sleep changes over your life cycle
- Check medicines

Don't

- Worry about not enough sleep
- Lie worrying about other problems
- Use bed for other things
- Eat or drink caffeine close to bedtime
- Smoke close to bedtime
- Drink alcohol to late
- Go to bed until sleepy
- Take naps during the day
- Stay in bed longer to catch up on sleep

Useful books

The insomnia kit: practical advice for a good night's sleep

Chris Idzikowski

NewLeaf 1999

Contains illustrated book, 28-day sleep assessment diary and 60 minute audio tape with relaxation exercises.

An Introduction to Coping with Insomnia and Sleep

Problems (2nd edition) (An Introduction to Coping series)

Colin A. Espie Robinson 2017

Explains the causes of insomnia and why it is so difficult to break bad habits. This updated edition gives you clinically proven cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques for improving the quality of your sleep.

Useful books

Why we sleep: the new science of sleep and dreams

Matthew Walker

London Penguin 2017

This book explores twenty years of cutting-edge research to solve the mystery of why sleep matters. It explains really happens during REM sleep to how caffeine and alcohol affect sleep and why our sleep patterns change across a lifetime.

How to beat insomnia and sleep problems: One step at a time

Kirstie Anderson

Little, Brown 2018

A self help guide with sleep diaries. The perfect resource for helping you beat insomnia and sleep problems. Written in a friendly, engaging and jargon-free style. You will understand your sleep cycle, and learn techniques to get a better night's sleep.

Useful books

The One-week Insomnia Cure: Learn to Solve Your Sleep Problems

Professor Jason Ellis

Vermilion 2017

The Insomnia Cure provides a fast and long-lasting approach to identifying and managing insomnia and other sleep disorders. Find out how to understand and assess your sleep problem.

The Sleep Book: How to Sleep Well Every Night

Dr Guy Meadows

Orion 2014

Using a blend of mindfulness and new ACT therapy techniques, Dr Guy shares his unique five-week plan to cure your sleep problem whether it's a few restless nights or a lifetime of insomnia.