

Factsheet: **Sleep**

Stress can be a major cause of sleep problems. Addressing stress may help, but for some people there is no obvious reason why they are unable to get a good night's sleep. They may have trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or wake up too early in the morning, feeling unrefreshed. Lack of sleep can make you feel exhausted and irritable, and unable to concentrate on simple tasks.

Research has shown that after people sleep, they tend to retain information and perform better on memory tasks. Our bodies require long periods of sleep in order to restore and rejuvenate, to grow muscle, repair tissue, and synthesise hormones. It may also help the subconscious to process the day's events. About two in three people experience occasional difficulty sleeping, and one in three experiences chronic problems. How much sleep we need also varies with the individual.

Why do we have problems sleeping?

Sleep problems are more common in women and in people over sixty, and may have several causes.

Snoring

Snoring is more likely to cause sleep problems for the partner or family. In some cases, losing weight can alleviate the problem. In addition, snorers should avoid alcohol and heavy meals before bedtime, and sleep on their side.

Restless Leg Syndrome

In this frustrating condition the legs feel tingly, and the individual has the urge to move them. Cutting out caffeine and alcohol, having a warm bath and massaging the legs before bedtime can help, as can iron supplements.

Depression or Anxiety

Poor sleep can be a symptom of depression or anxiety. If disrupted sleep is accompanied by an inability to find pleasure in hobbies or friends, lack of motivation or thoughts of self-harm, it is very important that you see your GP immediately.

Sleep disorders

Disorders such as narcolepsy (falling asleep during the day), sleep apnoea (blocked airway during sleep causing repeated sudden waking), and sleep parasomnias (abnormal movements, behaviors, emotions, perceptions or dreams) are relatively rare. See your GP if you are affected by these conditions.

Ten Tips for Better Sleep

1. Get up at the same time every day

Wake up at the same time every day even when you have had a poor night's sleep. This helps your body find a natural rhythm that will help you go to sleep at night.

2. Exercise

Research shows that exercise improves sleep and helps sleep disorders such as insomnia. Exercising too close to bedtime though can sometimes inhibit sleep. Exercise when it's good for you.

3. Spent time outdoors

Increasing the amount of time you spend outdoors can improve sleep quality, try and get out for a walk at some point in the day.

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4. Look at your diet

Caffeine, alcohol, sugar, rich food or a heavy meal too near bedtime will affect your sleep. Try to cut down in the evenings or switch to decaf.

5. Have a wind-down routine

Have an evening routine involving reading, having a bath, preparing for the next day. Try calming your mind by focusing on your breathing, or try a mindfulness or meditation app.

6. Reduce screen time

The blue light from your phone or laptop suppresses melatonin which affects your sleep. Turn screens off an hour before bedtime and keep electronics out of the bedroom; buy an alarm clock rather than charging your phone by your bed.

7. Create a sleep sanctuary

Your bedroom should be cool, dark, and free from clutter, and your bed should be comfortable and supportive.

8. Waking up in the night

When you wake up at night, don't allow your mind to start thinking. If you can't get back to sleep get up, go to the loo, do something until you feel sleepy again – but keep the lights low. Reading can help as can writing down your thoughts on a notepad for the next day.

9. Try not to worry

Whilst having a routine is important for good sleep, try not to worry if life gets in the way and your sleep is affected. It's possible to survive a period of poor sleep with no ill effects. Give yourself permission to go to sleep later instead of forcing sleep to come, quality is more important than quantity.

10. Seek support

If you are having prolonged periods of interrupted or little sleep lasting more than a few weeks seek evidence based support from a health professional.

Treatment

Sleeping pills: Sleeping pills are most effective when used sparingly and for a short period of time, or "as needed" rather than on a daily basis. Many types have side-effects, and they should always be used with supervision by a GP, and only when everything else has failed.

Herbal Remedies: Herbal remedies, which some people believe can help, include lemon balm, lavender, St.John's Wort and camomile tea. Please note that care needs to be exercised in the taking of these alternative remedies as some may be contra-indicated if you are on certain medications. If in doubt please seek advice from your GP or local pharmacist.

Counselling: A Harvard Medical School study showed that Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) was more effective than sleeping pills in aiding sleep. Relaxation techniques, including mindfulness, meditation, prayer, breathing exercises and hypnosis, can also be beneficial.

With thanks to Stephanie Romiszewski from The Sleepyhead Clinic sleepyheadclinic.co.uk and Tony Hackett from thesleepwellmethod.co.uk

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