

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. Don't worry about not sleeping or label yourself with a condition

Don't tell yourself you have a sleep problem, which could create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

2. Keep a sleep log

People often underestimate the amount of sleep they actually get. It may not be as bad as you imagined. Some fitness trackers will monitor sleep, and you should also factor in any sleep you've had during the day.

3. Go to bed at a regular time

Decide what time you want to get up, and go to bed about eight hours before that.

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4. Make your bedroom a sleep conducive environment

Your bedroom should be cool and dark, and your bed should be comfortable and supportive. Keep electronics out of the bedroom, although white noise or gentle music may help.

5. Get regular exercise

Research shows that exercise improves sleep and helps sleep disorders such as insomnia.

6. Manage your stress levels.

The more stressed you are, the harder you'll find it to switch off and get to sleep. Read our stress factsheet for tips on dealing with stress.

7. Have a wind down routine

Excessive amounts of caffeine, alcohol, rich food, physical or mental activity near bedtime will be counterproductive. Have an evening routine which is conducive to going to bed and involves relaxation and enjoyment for an hour or so. Ensuring you are prepared for the next day can help you to relax.

8. Clear your head

Get into the practice of quietening the mind at bedtime. Calm your mind and try not to dwell on too many intrusive thoughts but rather focus on your breathing.

9. Practice Mind Mechanics

Keep a notebook by the bed to note down any thoughts which occur, and deal with them the following day. Replace those thoughts with visualisation of somewhere peaceful and relaxing. You could also look into mindfulness or meditation which can help you to sleep.

10. If you wake up in the night

When we wake up at night it is generally for a reason, often because we need to go to the toilet, so just get up and go. During this short period of semi wakefulness, don't allow your mind to start thinking.

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.