

SLEEPING WELL

Introduction

We don't usually need to think very much about our sleep – it's just a part of life that we take for granted. When we can't sleep, though, it can be a real problem. In fact, most of us will find it hard to sleep at some point in our lives. We have a word for it – insomnia. It's often just for a short time, perhaps when we're worried or excited. After a few days, things settle down and we get back to sleeping normally. However, we need sleep to keep our minds and bodies healthy. If we carry on sleeping badly, we start to notice the effects.



What is Sleep?

While we sleep, we are not aware of what is going on around us. However, while we sleep, a lot of important things happen to our bodies. Sleep therefore keeps us healthy.

We sleep in different ways at different times of the night. One of the most important types of sleep is called Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep. It comes and goes throughout the night and takes up around one fifth of our sleep time. During REM sleep the brain is particularly active – our eyes move quickly from side to side and we dream. The rest of the time, during non-REM sleep, the brain is quiet, but hormones are released into the bloodstream and our bodies repair themselves after the wear and tear of the day.

How Much Sleep Do We Need?

This depends on our age and how much we exercise, but it also varies a lot between people of the same age. Babies sleep for about 17 hours each day, but older children need only 9 to 10 hours a night. Most adults need between 7 and 8 hours sleep each night, but this can get less as you get older, if you don't take much exercise.

There is a lot of difference between individuals, and some people can manage on only 3 hours a night, but there is some evidence that this may make you less alert as time goes by and may affect your performance.

What Happens If I Don't Sleep?

It's easy to worry when you can't sleep. The occasional night without sleep will make you feel tired the next day, but it won't harm your physical or mental health.

However, after several sleepless nights, you will start to find that:

- you are tired all the time
- you drop off during the day
- you find it difficult to concentrate
- you find it hard to make decisions
- you start to feel depressed.

Lack of sleep may also make us more vulnerable to high blood pressure, obesity and diabetes.

SLEEP PROBLEMS IN ADULT LIFE

Sleeping too little (Insomnia)

You may feel that you aren't getting enough sleep or that, even if you do get the hours, you don't get a good night's rest.

There are many everyday reasons for not sleeping well:

- the bedroom may be too noisy, too hot or too cold
- the bed may be uncomfortable or too small
- you partner may have a different pattern of sleep from yourself
- you may not have a regular routine, or may not be getting enough exercise
- eating too much can make it difficult to get off to sleep
- going to bed hungry can make you wake too early
- cigarettes, alcohol and drinks containing caffeine, such as tea and coffee
- illness, pain or a high temperature.

Some more serious causes include:

- emotional problems
- difficulties at work
- anxiety and worry
- depression – you may wake very early in the morning and not be able to get back to sleep
- thinking over and over about day to day problems.

Can Medication Help?

People have used sleeping tablets for many years but we now know that they are not a permanent answer. They tend to make you feel tired and irritable the next day. They lose their effect quite quickly so you have to take more and more to get the same effect, which is one reason why some people become addicted to them. The longer someone takes sleeping tablets, the more likely they are to become dependent on them. Sleeping tablets should only be used for short periods for instance when someone is so distressed that they cannot sleep at all.

Over the Counter Medications

You can buy several remedies at your chemist, without the need for a prescription. These products will often contain an anti-histamine, like you find in medicines for hay-fever, coughs and colds. These do work but they can make you sleepy well into the next morning. If you do use them, take the warnings seriously and don't drive or operate heavy machinery the next day. Another problem is tolerance – as your body gets used to the substance, you need to take more and more to get the same effect. It is best not to take anti-histamines for a long time.

Herbal alternatives are usually based on a herb called Valerian. It probably works best if you take it nightly for 2-3 weeks or more. It doesn't seem to work so well if you take it occasionally. As with the anti-histamines, you need to be careful about the effects lasting into the following morning. If you are taking any medication for your blood pressure (or any other sleeping tablets or tranquillisers), have a chat with your doctor before using an over the counter remedy.

Psychological Treatments

A technique called cognitive behavioral therapy has been shown to be helpful. It involves looking at unhelpful ways of thinking that can make you more anxious, and so interfere with your sleep.

Things to Avoid

- Alcohol.
Everybody knows that alcohol can help you to fall asleep. The problem is that you will usually wake up half-way through the night. If you drink alcohol regularly to help you sleep, you will find that you need to drink more and more to get the same effect. If you drink regularly and you stop drinking suddenly, you may find it hard to sleep for a week or two.
- Slimming tablets make it hard to sleep, as do street drugs like Ecstasy, cocaine and amphetamines.

Helping Yourself

Here are some simple tips that many people have found helpful.

Do's...

- Make sure that your bed and bedroom are comfortable - not too hot, not too cold, not too noisy.
- Make sure that your mattress supports you properly. It should not be so firm that your hips and shoulders are under pressure or so soft that your body sags. Generally, you should replace your mattress every 10 years to get the best support and comfort.
- Get some exercise. Don't overdo it, but try some regular swimming or walking. The best time to exercise is in the daytime - particularly late afternoon or early evening. Exercising later than this may disturb your sleep.
- Take some time to relax properly before going to bed. Some people find aromatherapy helpful.
- If something is troubling you, and there is nothing you can do about it right away, try writing it down before going to bed and then tell yourself to deal with it tomorrow.
- If you can't sleep, get up and do something you find relaxing. Read, watch television or listen to quiet music. After a while you should feel tired enough to go to bed again.

Don'ts...

- Don't go without sleep for a long time - go to bed when you are tired and stick to a routine of getting up at the same time every day, whether you still feel tired or not.
- Caffeine hangs around in your body for many hours after your last drink of tea or coffee. Stop drinking tea or coffee by mid-afternoon. If you want a hot drink in the evening, try something milky or herbal (but check there's no caffeine in it).
- Don't drink a lot of alcohol. It may help you fall asleep, but you will almost certainly wake up during the night.
- Don't eat or drink a lot late at night. Try to have your supper early in the evening rather than late.
- If you've had a bad night, don't sleep in the next day – it will make it harder to get off to sleep the following night.

If you try these tips and you still can't sleep, go and see your doctor. You can talk over any problems that may be stopping you from sleeping. Your doctor can make sure that your sleeplessness is not being caused by a physical illness, a prescribed medicine, or emotional problems. There is some evidence that cognitive behavioural therapy (see above), can be helpful if your sleeplessness has gone on for a long time.

Self-help organisations

The Sleep Council: <http://www.sleepcouncil.org.uk/>

Tel: 01756 791089

Promotes the benefits of sleeping well.

Provides information leaflets on sleep and beds.

National Sleep Foundation

American website with information on sleep and sleep disorders

Narcolepsy Association UK (UKAN)

Tel: 0845 4500 394; email: info@narcolepsy.org.uk

Promotes the interests of people with narcolepsy and encourages better understanding of the illness.

Sleep Disorder Clinics. There are a number of Sleep Disorder Clinics, but referral to one of them should be made through your family doctor. Patients cannot refer themselves

Useful reading

Get a better night's sleep (Positive Health Guides), by Ian Oswald and Kirstine Adam (Optima).

Insomnia: Doctor I can't sleep, by Adrian Williams (Amberwood Publishing).

SUGGESTIONS FOR SLEEPING BEFORE EXAMS

1. Do **NOT** work within 2 hours of going to bed.
2. Go to bed at an appropriate time, not too early and not too late (i.e. 11-11.30)
3. Take a warm bath/shower.
4. Have a warm milky drink (not coffee or tea after supper, nor Coca-Cola or Red Bull).
5. Do **NOT** use alcohol to induce sleep.
6. Take a book to bed (not too exciting and nothing to do with work).
7. Listen to the radio (speech not music), best if you have a sleep button.
8. If all this fails, don't just lie there, start the process again.
9. Still get up at 8am, whether you have slept or not.