

# Improving your sleep

## A self help guide

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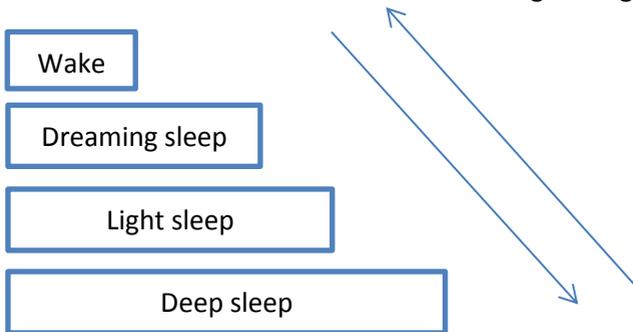


Good quality sleep is very important for our bodies and minds. If we struggle to sleep then lying in bed and trying to make it happen is more likely to keep us awake. Having a relaxed mind and body when we are in bed and making some simple changes to our habits and routines is the best way to increase our chances of getting the sleep that we need.

## What is normal sleep?

Sleep is not like a light switch for your brain and either on or off. We flow through cycles of light sleep, deep sleep and dreaming sleep throughout each night.

The stages of sleep can be thought of like a staircase. As we go down the stairs our sleep gets deeper. We travel up and down the staircase a number of times during the night.



A young adult will spend about 25% of the night in dreaming sleep, 50% of the night in light sleep, 20% of the night in deep sleep and 5% of the night awake\*.

An older adult will spend about 20% of the night in dreaming sleep, 50% of the night in light sleep, 5% of the night in deep sleep and 25% of the night awake\*.

*\*Waking up a few times during the night is a part of normal sleep. Even people who seem to sleep very deeply will wake up a few times each night but they go back to sleep so quickly that they don't remember waking. Awakenings are most likely to occur from dreaming and light sleep. The number and length of these awakenings tend to increase as we get older.*

# How much sleep do we need?

## Individual sleep need

We all need different amounts of sleep. The average adult sleep requirement is 7 to 8 hours a night but you may need less or more than this. Some adults can manage on as few as 4 hours sleep overnight whereas others struggle during the day if they have not slept for over 10 hours.

## Our natural rhythm

We also have our own “body clock” that determines when we prefer to go to sleep and wake up.



40% of us are natural morning types or larks who prefer to go to bed early and rise early.

30% of us are natural evening types or owls who prefer to go to bed late and rise late.



30% of us are somewhere in between these two patterns.

Sleeping problems can arise when someone who is a natural owl tries to fit into a lark pattern or when people work shifts that don't fit in with their body clock.

## Age

The amount of sleep we need varies with age.

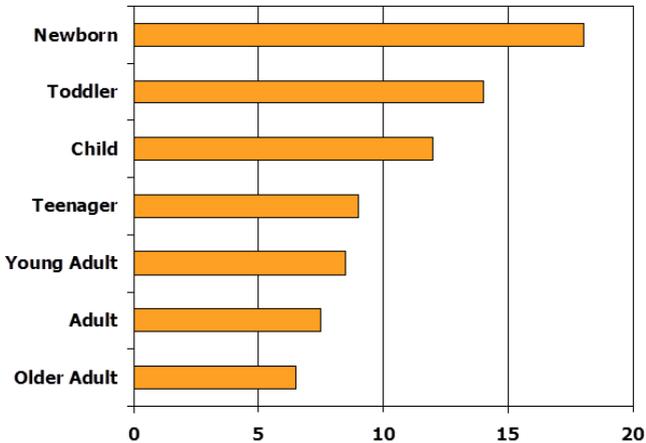


Newborn babies sleep up to 18 hours a day (although it may not feel like this to new parents).

Adults over 70 may sleep for only 6 hours a day (this may be a mixture of sleep at night and naps during the day).



Average Daily Sleep Time (hours)



## Activity levels

People leading an active busy life will often need more sleep than someone who is less active.

## Signs that you may not be getting enough sleep

- Waking up feeling tired.
- Needing to drink lots of tea, coffee, cola or energy drinks to keep yourself awake.
- Falling asleep during the day. This may be a planned afternoon nap or dozing off when you weren't expecting to.
- Feeling that you need to have a lie-in at the weekend to catch up on sleep.
- Sleeping through your alarm or using the snooze button lots of times.

## Sleep Problems

Sleep problems are very common. Most people will experience sleep difficulties at some time in their lives.

About 1 in 10 people experience long term sleep problems (this can be as high as 1 in 5 people over 65).

### Types of Sleep Problem

Sleep problems vary and people may have more than one sleep difficulty. Common complaints include:

*"I struggle to get off to sleep."*

*"I wake up in the middle of the night and I struggle to get back to sleep."*

*“I wake up early and I can’t get back to sleep.”*

*“I never get a deep sleep.”*

*“I’m restless and disturbed all night.”*

*“I’m sleepy during the day.”*

## **What can cause sleep problems?**

### **A normal effect of aging**

As we get older we tend to sleep less and our sleep tends to be lighter and more broken. Retirement can lead to a less structured day and reduced activity levels can also have an impact on sleep. If we get into the habit of napping in the afternoon or evening then this reduces our drive to sleep at night which can worsen sleep quality.

### **The sleeping environment**

Our bedroom should be a relaxing, comfortable place that encourages us to sleep. If it is uncomfortable or full of distractions then our sleep can be affected. Some people also find that they sleep poorly in an unfamiliar place.

### **Our sleep routines**

If we have different bed times and rise times during the week or unhelpful sleep habits then it is difficult to have a good quality sleep.

## Medical problems

Medical problems can often be a cause of disturbed sleep. Reasons can include:

Physical Conditions	Medications	Mental health
<p>Conditions that make you go to the toilet during the night.</p> <p>Pain caused by conditions such as arthritis or fibromyalgia.</p> <p>Sleep disorders such as obstructive sleep apnoea or the restless legs syndrome.</p>	<p>Some medications can affect your sleep at night or make you feel drowsy during the day.</p>	<p>If you are depressed, worried, stressed or anxious then your sleep can be affected.</p> <p>Stressful life events such as bereavement or money concerns will often affect your sleep quality.</p>

***If you think that a physical problem, your medication or a mental health problem may be affecting your sleep then make an appointment to see your GP.***

## Good Sleep Habits (“Sleep Hygiene”)

Sleep experts use the term “sleep hygiene” to refer to how your sleeping environment and your behaviour affects your sleep. In order to maximise your chances of sleeping well then it is important to have good sleep hygiene.

The following are tips to improve your sleep hygiene. Not all of the tips may be relevant to you but it is a good idea to try as many of them as possible and all at the same time. Please also remember that these tips are not a quick fix and that doing them for just a day or two will probably not make a difference. The advice should be followed as strictly as possible for 4 weeks or longer in order to experience the full benefits.

### Regular routines

Your body clock responds best to regular routines. If you only choose one tip to follow make it:



**Stick to the same bed time and rise time 7 days a week.**

Use an alarm to wake you at the same time each day. Don't be tempted to use the snooze button. Don't sleep in more than 60 minutes later at weekends.

Make sure you spend enough time in bed each night to get the sleep that you need but also don't spend too long in bed. If you find yourself awake for long periods of time each night then you may find it helpful to spend less time in bed. If you are waking up tired or are feeling sleepy during the day then you should try spending longer in bed.

Don't nap during the day. Any daytime naps will reduce your drive to sleep at night. If you think you may doze off at a certain time of day then try to plan to be active at that time or set a repeating 10 minute alarm on your phone to wake you if you fall asleep.

## Before bed time

### *Caffeine*



This is a stimulant found in tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks and chocolate.

Having a few caffeinated drinks in the early part of the day is unlikely to affect your sleep at night. Caffeine in the morning can be very useful for waking you up.

Caffeine later in the day can cause you to take longer to get to sleep and make your sleep lighter and more broken. Caffeine will stay in your system for up to 8 hours. As a general rule you should avoid caffeine after 5pm.

### *Alcohol*



A few alcoholic drinks early in the evening are unlikely to affect your sleep quality. Heavy alcohol consumption or having an alcoholic drink just before bed is likely to affect your sleep.

Many people use alcohol if they are having trouble sleeping but this is not a good idea. Although it can help you to get off to sleep more quickly, as your body breaks it down it becomes a stimulant that makes your sleep lighter and more broken for the second part of the night.

Alcohol also worsens snoring and obstructive sleep apnoea and it makes it more likely that you will need to get up during the night to use the toilet.

### *Smoking/Vaping*



Nicotine is a stimulant that can act in the same way as caffeine. It is sensible to cut down on smoking or vaping close to bed time and you should avoid smoking or vaping if you wake during the night.

### *Food*



Having the same meal times each day can be helpful in encouraging a regular body clock.

Do not go to bed hungry but avoid having a large meal close to bedtime. A light carbohydrate-rich snack such as a piece of toast, a biscuit or a piece of fruit are sensible options.



### *Exercise*

Regular exercise is helpful in improving sleep quality.

Try to exercise at the same time of day but avoid heavy exercise late in the evening.

### *Relaxing*



Spend at least an hour relaxing before going to bed.

During this time avoid bright, blue-wavelength light sources such as mobile phones, iPads or laptops. Getting light exposure at this time reduces the production of a hormone

called melatonin that is important in making you feel drowsy and ready for sleep. Watching television during this time is fine as long as you are not sitting too close to the screen.

Some people find it helpful to have a shower or bath before bed.

### *Address worries*



If you tend to have a busy mind at night then take some time in the evening to write down any concerns or worries and make a plan for the following day.

### **Sleeping environment**

Your bedroom should be quiet and dark and not too hot or cold. Consider using an eye mask and ear plugs if necessary.

Your mattress should feel comfortable. Consider a mattress topper or replacing your mattress if it is too hard or too soft. Mattresses typically need replacing every 10 years and pillows need replacing every 1 or 2 years.

Try some simple relaxation exercises if your mind is too active during the night.



Keep your bedroom only for sleep and sex. Remove distractions such as mobile phones, televisions, radios, food, drink and pets from the bedroom.

#### **Try the 20 minute rule**

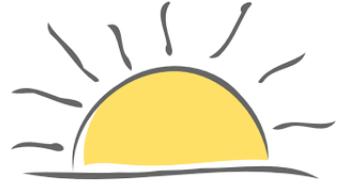
**If you find yourself awake in bed longer than 20 minutes and you are starting to feel anxious or frustrated then leave the bedroom. For 20 minutes do something relaxing and distracting such as listening to the radio or reading before going back to bed.**



Set an alarm for the morning but hide any clocks from view during the night. Clock watching can cause you to worry and make it harder to get to sleep.

### In the morning

Get out of bed when your alarm goes off.



Get as much bright light exposure as possible during the first hour after waking – this will increase your melatonin production that evening.

Have a caffeinated drink when you first get up.

## Good Sleep Habits Summary

Do	Don't
Keep the same bed time and rise time 7 days a week.	Take your worries to bed.
Spend long enough in bed.	Spend too long in bed.
Ensure your bedroom is a comfortable, quiet and relaxing place.	Smoke, take alcohol or drink caffeine close to bed time.
Exercise regularly.	Go to bed hungry or too full.
Spend at least an hour relaxing before bed.	Nap during the day.
Get lots of bright light in the mornings.	Have distractions in the bedroom.
Remember that sleep needs change throughout life and that brief awakenings during the night are normal.	Use mobile phones, iPads or laptops late in the evening or during the night.