

Sleep Advice During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Data from Public Health England show that 41% of people in England are experiencing more sleep problems than usual at the moment. Younger people are most at risk of sleep disturbance, with 52% of 16 to 29 year olds affected.

The pandemic has created a number of new challenges when it comes to achieving good quality sleep. These may include:

Disruption of daily life	Anxiety, worry and stress	Depression and isolation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A changed daily schedule or lack of schedule. • Not setting an alarm in the morning. • Irregular meal times. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worry about the health of yourself, your family and friends. • Money worries. • Additional childcare and home-schooling responsibilities. • 66% of those suffering with stress or anxiety report during also suffering with sleep problems. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being required to socially isolate can result in feelings of depression. • 77% of those individuals experiencing a lower mood than usual report more sleep problems during the outbreak.
Excess screen time	Increased use of stimulants	Having less to do during the day
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checking for news on your phone more frequently, possibly during the night. • Watching more television. • Using social media more frequently. • Using a computer for home working. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boredom and stress may lead to an increased use of alcohol, caffeine or nicotine. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower activity levels. • Less time spent outside.

Sleeping poorly is a normal reaction to very stressful situations and it affects us all in different ways.

For some people, stress may cause the body to enter into a state of “hyper-alertness” so that they are ready to respond to danger.

This can lead to difficulty getting to sleep or staying asleep (insomnia).

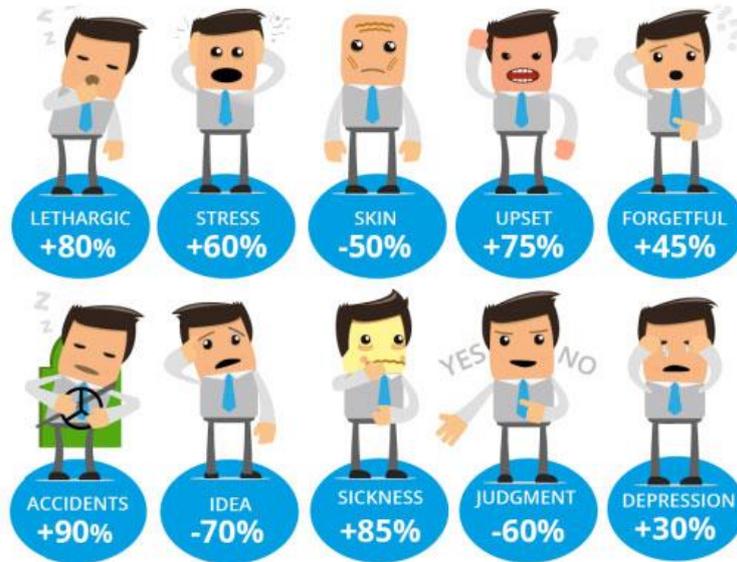


For others the body may enter into a state of “shutting down” to avoid the stressful situation.

This can cause oversleeping (hypersomnia).

In the short term this reaction can actually be helpful to keep us safe, but if the stressful situation and the poor sleep persist over a longer period of time then our mental and physical health can be affected.

Effects of long-term sleep deprivation.



Some of the important roles of sleep include:

Improving the way our immune system responds to illness.	Improving our brain function – helping with learning, memory, decision-making and complex thinking.	Improving our mood and making us more able to cope with difficult situations.
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During these challenging times we should aim to keep our body and mind healthy, and our immune system working as well as possible. This makes it all the more important for us to make getting enough good-quality sleep a priority and to make sure our behaviour is optimised to increase the chances of getting the sleep we need.

We all need a different amount of sleep and this changes throughout our lives, with the normal pattern tending to be that we require less sleep as we get older. Some adults can manage on as few as 4 hours sleep overnight whereas others struggle during the day if they have not slept for 10 hours. However, naturally very short and very long sleepers are actually quite rare and the average adult sleep requirement is 7 to 8 hours a night. You may find that you need less or more than this to feel alert and well during the day but as a general rule this is what most of us should aim for.

Some tips to promote better sleep

- **Try to have a regular bed time and rise time.** Set an alarm to wake you at the same time each day and get up when the alarm goes off and leave the bed. Avoid using the snooze button. Don't be tempted to lie-in even if you have had a bad night.
- **Allow yourself some "worry time".** Set yourself two times during the day, for example after breakfast and after your evening meal, when you are going to stop and think about your worries and your problems. Consider writing a list of your worries and a possibly a plan of action for some of them. Try to speak to someone else about your worries if you can. Try to identify things that you can control and things that you can't. Limit these periods of worry to no more than 30 minutes and tell yourself not to think about these things outside of your worry time.
- **Only use your bed for sleep and sex.** Only go to bed when you are sleepy at night-time and don't rest, read, watch television or play games either on or in your bed during the day.
- **Try to work with your body's own natural rhythm as much as possible.** If you tend to prefer a later bed time and rise time (you are a natural owl) then don't go to bed too early. If you tend to prefer an earlier bed time and rise time (you are a natural lark) then don't go to bed too late.
- **Make time each day to do something you enjoy.** Try to spend time communicating with others and discussing things that are distracting and aren't related to Coronavirus. Limit the amount of time you are exposed to information about Covid-19 and stick to content from trustworthy sources.
- **Make time during the day to do something relaxing.** Deep breathing, stretching, yoga, mindfulness, meditation, listening to music or quiet reading are all examples you could consider.
- **Do not use mobile phones and electronic tablets in bed.** If possible avoid using electronic devices with bright screens for at least 1 hour before going to bed. If you need to use a device in the evening then set a low blue light filter.
- **Prepare your bedroom for sleep.** Make sure your sleeping environment is dark, quiet, the right temperature and as comfortable as possible.
- **Get as much bright light exposure as possible during the first hour after rising.** Have breakfast in a brightly lit room or outside if possible.
- **Try to get some exercise every day.** The exercise does not need to be vigorous (walking is fine) but should be for at least 20 minutes and ideally outside in the daylight and not just before bed.
- **Think about the light levels and giving your body clock the right signals.** Keep your home bright during the day, dim the light levels in the evening and keep your bedroom as dark as possible during the night. Keep your mealtimes, when you take your medication and when you exercise regular.
- **Have the same bedtime routine every night,** for example having a bath/shower, changing into your nightwear and then watching television or reading for 30 minutes before getting into bed. Make sure the last 30 minutes before bed are spent doing something calming and relaxing in dimly lit conditions in order to prepare your body for sleep. If you are working from home then allow at least 60 minutes after stopping work to wind down before getting into bed.
- **Follow the 20 minute rule.** If you find yourself awake in bed for longer than about 20 minutes (either when you first get into bed or if you wake later in the night) then get up for a short break away from the bedroom. During the break do something distracting, for example watching

something unstimulating on television, and wait 20 to 30 minutes before returning to bed. Repeat the strategy as needed throughout the night.

- **Avoid napping during the day.** If you know you are likely to feel sleepy at a particular time of day, for example after lunch, then plan to do something active at that time rather than something that involves sitting down. If you find it impossible not to nap during the day then restrict yourself to a nap of no longer than 30 minutes in the early afternoon and not after 3pm.
- **Try to limit your intake of caffeine, alcohol and nicotine.** Avoid caffeine for 6 hours before you go to bed and avoid heavy alcohol and nicotine consumption late in the evening.

Not all of these tips may be relevant to your particular sleep problem and some might not be practical for your home situation but you should try to do as many of them as possible at the same time in order to experience the maximum benefits. Please also remember that there is not always a quick fix to sleep problems and that the advice may need to be followed for a few weeks before your sleep quality is fully improved.



We hope you find the advice helpful.

Other sources of information

Every Mind Matters. A video produced by Public Health England featuring Professor Colin Espie, an expert on insomnia treatment, talking you through some tips to help you sleep and how to switch off before you go to bed.

<https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/sleep/>

Self-Help Books

- *How to Beat Insomnia and Sleep Problems: One Step at a Time.* Dr Kirstie Anderson 2018
- *An Introduction to Coping With Insomnia and Sleep Problems (2nd edition) (An Introduction to Coping Series).* Colin A Espie 2017