

Self-Management advice to improve sleep

Therapy Department



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What is 'normal' sleep?

It is different for each individual.

What is sleep for?

- Restoration and recovery of body systems
- Energy conservation
- Memory consolidation
- Process emotions - dreaming

How much sleep do you need?

Enough sleep to feel refreshed and able to perform your daily tasks satisfactorily.

The Sleep Council UK recommends 7-9 hours for adults and 7-8 hours for adults aged 65+

Common sleep problems

- Difficulty getting to sleep.
- Waking up often during the night.
- Waking too early in the morning.
- Not feeling refreshed when you wake up in the morning.

Some people with persistently poor or disturbed sleep may find that their health is affected.

A normal sleep pattern

- Sleep is divided into 90 minute cycles.
- These cycles repeat 3 to 6 times per night. With more rapid eye movement sleep (REM) towards the end of the night
- In order to feel fully rested and refreshed when we wake up, we must experience all four stages.
- A full night's sleep will include of five or six cycles, while a disturbed, restless night consists of fewer.
- A 'normal sleeper' awakens up to 12 times per night without any recollection.
- STAGE 1 - at the beginning of the cycle – feeling drowsy
- STAGES 2 & 3 – 50% of sleep, breathing slower and muscles relaxed
- STAGE 4 – 20% of sleep, slow breathing, get disorientated if awakened
- REM sleep – dreaming sleep, breathing as if awake

Why is sleep disturbed?

- Most people will experience poor sleep occasionally but will revert to normal sleep patterns within a few days. For some people the sleep pattern becomes more persistent and starts to affect their physical and mental health
- Sleep can be disturbed by:
- Environmental factors
- Illness – physical and/or mental
- Medication
- Chronic pain
- Age
- Stress
- Sleep disorders

Effects of sleep deprivation

- Decreased reaction time
- Poor short term memory
- Decreased cognitive ability
- Muscular pain
- Depression
- Irritability
- Accidents
- Weakened immune system

Sleep and pain

Sleep disturbance may lower your pain threshold. This could lead to:

- Increased pain from an already painful condition.
- Pain from a condition that hadn't previously been painful.
- Pain that was previously felt only in a particular part of the body becoming more widespread.

Sleep hygiene

Sleep hygiene is a term used to describe the ways that we can tidy up lifestyle and habits in order to promote sleep. We have seen that it is important to keep regular hours and to wind down before sleeping: it is also important to create a strong association between the bedroom and sleeping. In order to get to sleep the "body clock" needs to know it's time to sleep. It needs to be reset daily by: getting daylight, regular meal times and social activity

The following guidelines will help to prepare for sleep:

- Get up at the same time every day.
- In order to reset your body clock and to allow for your natural drive for sleep to build up, you should keep to the same rising time – even at weekends.
- If you sleep in the day, you decrease the drive to sleep at night. Resist any temptation to nap.
- Keep the bedroom for sleep only.
- You should not do any waking activity in the bedroom – the only exception is sex, which can actually help sleep. Watching television, using a laptop, making telephone calls and even reading are all waking activities and should not be done in the bedroom, especially if you are a poor sleeper.

The bedroom should be a calm place that encourages sleep. You should do whatever you can to regulate ventilation and temperature, and to exclude excessive noise and light. It may not be a good idea to try to achieve perfect silence or darkness at home because that could make it very hard to sleep anywhere else. There is no need for a special mattress or pillows: the main thing is that you feel comfortable.

- Remove the bedroom clock.
- If you cannot take the clock out of your bedroom, turn it round so that you cannot see the clock face but can hear the alarm. Knowing what time it is will not help you to sleep: for most people who do not sleep well it just emphasises the problem and raises anxiety levels.
- Stop or reduce caffeine.
- Most people know that caffeine can keep you awake: it is a stimulant. Caffeine is found not only in coffee but also in tea, chocolate, some soft drinks and some medicines (such as Anadin Extra). It is worth checking the labels of products like these.
- Avoid caffeine for about six hours before bedtime. You might like to experiment with decaffeinated drinks but if you reduce or stop your caffeine intake you could find that you have headaches. This is normal and should last no more than a few days.
- Watch your alcohol intake.
- Alcohol is a nervous system depressant, (the opposite of caffeine). Alcohol will not help your sleep. Although it might 'knock you out', it is likely to wake you up early as its effect wears off. Furthermore, too much fluid before bedtime will probably disturb you more often in the night to go to the toilet. In the long term, overuse of alcohol could affect your sleep pattern (as well as causing other health problems). Alcohol should not be used to aid sleep.

- Cut down on cigarettes if you are a smoker.
- Nicotine is stimulant and, like caffeine, can affect sleep even though there might be a sense of relaxation. If you do smoke and are not ready to give up, try to cut down on cigarettes in the evening and have the last one earlier. Avoid smoking if you wake up in the night.
- Take exercise.
- There are strong links between exercise and good sleep. Low activity levels reinforce sleep disorders Exercise is a factor that affects the body clock: if you take less exercise in the day, it will make sleeping harder. Late evening exercise tends to liven people up when they should be winding down. It is recommended to exercise in the morning or in the late afternoon/early evening. Taking a walk, having a swim or getting out on your bike would be good exercise but if you have not been used to exercise you should start gently. If you are unsure about exercise, especially if you have any kind of medical condition, you should seek further advice from your doctor.
- Establish a wind-down routine in the evening.
- It is important to relax in the hour or two before bedtime and to have all the business of the day sorted out. How you wind down is a personal choice.
- Many people like to have a milky drink before bedtime and if you are hungry a light snack will help. However, you should avoid having a heavy meal just before bedtime as the body will need to digest the food and this could disturb your sleep.
- If you like to read and it helps you to wind down, do it before you get into bed. As noted before, reading is a waking activity. Some people like to listen to music or to the radio and, of course, many watch television. The important thing is not to read, listen to, or watch anything that is likely to be upsetting or exciting that will stop you winding down.

The following measures are also important:

- Learn to relax and let go of tension.
- Deal with problems and worries before you go to bed.
- Strengthen the association between your bed and night time sleep.

Strengthening the association between bed and sleep

When you have tidied up your sleep habits and established a regular rising time throughout the week, the next step is to build on that by ensuring that you go to bed only when you are sleepy and by not staying in bed if you are awake.

What is a reasonable time to go to bed?

This is obviously a personal choice and will also depend on the time that you have set for your rising time and on your own circumstances. For most people it is likely to be between

10pm and midnight. However, it would be a mistake to go to bed just because it is “bedtime”, although this is what many people do. You should go to bed when you are feeling “sleepy tired”. This increases your chance of falling asleep, rather than staying awake in bed and creating a bad association – or an expectation of spending a long time awake in bed.

What if you do not fall asleep even if you were sleepy when you went to bed?

You know better than we do that this happens, but think about what happens next. Do you find that your mind starts to work overtime? Some people start to worry about their problems or they just get frustrated about not sleeping and then worry about how they will manage everything they have to do tomorrow, for example. Before long, the bed becomes a place where there is less expectation of relaxing and less chance of sleeping. Just being in bed can begin to become an unpleasant experience and a bad association can soon be established. So, if you find that you are lying in bed awake after about 15 minutes from settling down for sleep, you should get out of bed.

The 15 minute rule

This helps to strengthen the association between bed and sleep but it is difficult and not to be recommended lightly. It is NOT recommended for older people or those with a disability and where there is a risk of falls

If you have not gone to sleep within 15 minutes of going to bed, or gone back to sleep within 15 minutes waking in the night, you should get out of bed and go somewhere else.

The first thing to remember is that your timing of 15 minutes should be an **estimate**: you should certainly NOT start to watch the clock.

You should return to bed only when you feel sleepy again but if you do not sleep in about 15 minutes, you should repeat the process.

It helps to plan ahead for this. Where will you go? What will you do? Would it help to have a milky drink already prepared in a flask in case you wake in the night? How will you keep warm? These are personal choices that you should think about, but the important thing is to do something that is not stimulating and not likely to wake you up more than you are already: watching television is not a good idea but you could listen to music, the radio, or read a magazine, for example. It is best not to eat because that could develop into a habit where you wake up because you have become used to a snack in the night.

People often worry about disturbing a partner and it is something you might need to discuss. If they are in the deeper stages of sleep you will not wake them but if they do wake it is probably because they were in light sleep and about to wake anyway. If they understand what you are doing, and why, they are less likely to worry and to return to sleep quickly.

Tips for getting back to sleep

Cognitive arousal

This is where we have a “racing” mind and find it difficult to switch off. To help this try rehearsal and planning:

- Rehearsal – set aside 20 minutes in the evening in a quiet place with a notebook.
- Reflect on the day and consider any loose ends and worries
- Plan and allocate time to deal with any issues
- Once in bed remind yourself that you have a plan and put the thought to one side

Imagery

- Plan in advance
- Associated with relaxation
- It should be a detailed image of a pleasant place or event
- Make it emotionally neutral

Cognitive strategies

- Identify a negative automatic thought (NAT) and replace with a realistic thought and move onto another strategy like imagery
- Challenge the thought
 - “I am never going to get to sleep”
 - I always manage to settle to sleep at some point
 - “I won’t cope tomorrow”
 - I will manage tomorrow as I have before, I might not be at my best but I will get through the day

Paradoxical (doing the opposite) Intent

- Do not try to fall asleep but lie in the dark with eyes open.
- State to yourself that ‘sleep will come when it is ready’: and that ‘relaxing in bed is almost as good’.

If your eyes try to close tell yourself to resist for just another few minutes’. This procedure ‘tempts’ sleep to take over naturally, especially if you are tired.

Thought stopping

- Try to ignore irrelevant ideas and thoughts.
- Repeat a neutral word (such as 'the') every few seconds in your mind.
- Try to keep it up for 5 minutes

Summary-Establishing an optimal sleep pattern

1. Establish a regular rising time and set the alarm.
2. Decide the time after which you will go to bed – when you are 'sleepy tired' – probably sometime between 10:00pm and midnight, but it will also depend on your rising time.
3. Put the light out immediately when you retire to bed.
4. Do not read or watch television in bed: these are waking activities.
5. Try the strategies for getting to sleep.
6. If you are not asleep within 15 minutes get out of bed and sit and relax in another room until you are 'sleepy tired' again.
7. Repeat steps 4 & 5 as often as is required, and also if you have any long awakenings in the night.
8. Do not nap during the day.
9. Do not take recovery sleep to compensate for a previous bad night.
10. Follow the programme rigidly to establish an efficient and regular pattern

Also:

- Take regular exercise.
- If you cannot cut out caffeine completely (i.e. tea, coffee, cola), take none after mid-afternoon.
- Further advice
- <https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/how-to-get-to-sleep/>

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Comments, Compliments or Complaints

The Patient Relations/Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) Department provides confidential on the spot advice, information and support to patients, relatives, friends, and carers.

Contact Us

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Ask 3 Questions

Become more involved in decisions about your healthcare. You may be asked to make choices about your treatment. To begin with, try to make sure you get the answers to three key questions:

1. What are my options?
2. What are the positives and negatives of each option for me?
3. How do I get support to help me make a decision that is right for me?



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