

Tinnitus and Sleep

Your questions answered

Patient Information

Audiology Service



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What is sleep, and why do we sleep?

Sleep is a mental and physical state where a person rests, becomes relatively inactive and unaware of their environment. Sleep appears to have a role in our physical and mental well-being, and in keeping our immune system working well. Scientists are not entirely sure why we sleep, but the main theories suggest it helps people to:

- Process, organise and store information they have gathered or learned during the day.
- Rest their body and mind to give it more energy
- Protect themselves from things that may hurt them at night, such as falling over unseen obstacles.

What happens when we sleep?

When we sleep, our bodies tend to slow down. Although we make some movements, our heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate all tend to decrease. Our brains stay active, and continue to work while we are asleep.

A normal night's sleep has several stages, from light to deep sleep, and we normally wake up several times during the night. The first wake-up normally happens after just a few hours sleep. The wake-ups are usually very short and we forget them by the morning.

Why do sleep patterns change?

Most people think that they need 8 hours sleep for it to be effective, but this is not always the case. Some people need fewer hours sleep.

As you grow older you experience less very deep sleep and more wake-ups. Sleep becomes lighter and more broken up. Stress and anxiety can affect our sleep patterns as well.

People who work shifts, especially continental or night shifts, may find changes to their sleep routine as they get used to sleeping at different times depending upon work hours.

Worrying about not getting enough sleep or being unable to get to sleep can cause negative thoughts, and actually make it harder to get to sleep.

What other factors can affect sleep patterns?

- Your bedroom. Is it too hot or cold, in a noisy area, or is your bed uncomfortable?
- Food. Are you eating too late, getting indigestion or eating foods that are stimulants? Are you sometimes hungry at bedtime?
- Cigarettes, alcohol and large amounts of caffeine all affect our brain chemistry and can stimulate or depress it.

- Lack of exercise and activity can mean we do not use up as much energy during the day and don't need as much rest at night.
- Light. The artificial light from screens, TVs, computers, mobile phones and tablets can trick our brain into thinking it is not time for sleep, and make us more awake.
- Emotional upsets. When we are worried, sad or angry, our brain needs to process these feelings before it can think about sleep.

Why does tinnitus affect sleep sometimes?

Usually it is very quiet at night-time when we are trying to get to sleep. Because we have no other sounds to focus on, our brain can begin to listen and focus on the tinnitus more. Some people find this annoying or worrying, and this can stop them from being able to relax and settle down into sleep.

During the night, when someone has a short wake-up, their brain can become aware of the tinnitus very quickly, because of the quiet in the room. This again can make some people wake up more fully, and stop them from getting back to sleep as easily. Not everyone who has tinnitus has a problem with sleep.

Are there any tips that can help people with tinnitus and sleep issues?

- Use sound at night to have something else to listen to other than the tinnitus sound. Natural or neutral sounds (like fans, or ticking clocks), CDs or mobile device apps can be very useful to have as a background noise. Music, radio or TV can be used, but may be more distracting.
- Speak to your GP to find out if there may be any other reasons for changes in your sleep pattern, e.g. medication or other medical conditions that can affect sleep.
- Take time to relax in the evenings before bed. Try reading or having a bath to help to unwind and slow your thought patterns down.
- If you can't sleep after 30 minutes, get up and do something calming until you feel sleepy.
- Try doing some regular exercise to help promote sleep. Try an exercise that suits you such as walking, going to the gym or cycling.
- Do practise relaxation exercises during the day and find some short form of relaxation to try at night. Try breathing exercises to help you relax
- Write your worries down. You may be able to solve them, or reduce anxiety about them by putting them onto paper.
- Don't drink a lot of alcohol. It may send you to sleep but will also disrupt the normal sleep pattern. You may wake sooner, snore more, or need to go to the toilet more frequently during the night.

- Try and create a regular bedtime and wake up time. This will help you to keep your body clock in a helpful cycle.
- Avoid spicy and greasy foods later at night, as these can give you heartburn. Some foods have natural stimulants and are better eaten earlier in the day. These include: bacon, cheese, ham, aubergine, raspberries, avocado, nuts, soy sauce and red wine.
- Some people find playing word games helps them to settle, such as going through an A-Z of countries and trying to name at least one country for each letter.

Please use this space to write notes or reminders.

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?



How We Use Your Information

For details on how we collect, use, and store the information we hold about you, please see patient information leaflet, Ref. **Corp 006** How we use your information, this can be found on the Patient Information Leaflets page on the Trust website, see details on the front cover.

This leaflet is also available in audio, large print, Braille, and other languages upon request. For more information, please ask in the department/ward.

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