

Achieving better sleep

A patient's guide

Sleep problems are common and affect a large proportion of people at some time in their lives. One question often asked is "How much sleep do I need?" for which there is no straight forward answer.

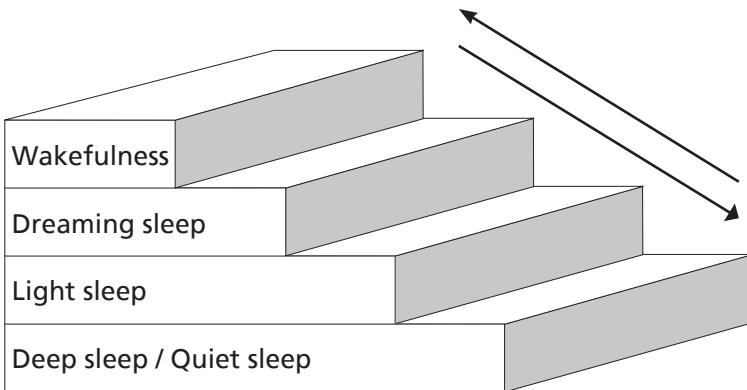
Individuals vary in their sleep requirement and the amount of sleep needed varies during a lifetime. The popular belief that we all need seven to eight hours sleep each night is not true. Age can affect the amount of the different types and quality of sleep we have. As we get older sleep can become lighter and more broken. Whatever your age, your sleep should usually be refreshing.

Sleep is a passive process; you cannot make yourself fall

asleep. Neither is sleep like a light bulb, either off or on.

Sleep flows through cycles of different stages including light sleep, deep sleep and dreaming sleep throughout each night. Stages of sleep can be thought of like a staircase. As you descend downward your sleep deepens and as you climb up the stairs your sleep is lighter. During each night you will travel up and down the staircase a number of times.

It is useful to recognise that some short periods of wakefulness during the night are normal. During times of stress or anxiety a series of poor nights sleep is not uncommon; this will often pass after a few days.



Good sleep habits (sleep hygiene)

This is the term used to describe how your sleeping environment and the things that you do during the day can influence your sleep, or can be changed to promote better sleep.

Body rhythms

You will find your body responds more positively when regular daily routines are maintained. Therefore regular bed times and get up times are important. Your body will then be able to prepare itself and be ready to sleep at bedtime. You are likely to sleep better overall if you can maintain a steady pattern, The following points are key to this:

- **Do not nap during the day.** This can upset your body's routine and make it harder for you to sleep well at night as your body has already achieved some of its daily sleep requirement.
- **Always get up and go to bed at the same time seven days a week,** however short your time asleep is.

An alarm clock is helpful to maintain this; you must resist any temptation to lie in. You should not use weekends to catch up with sleep as this will upset the rhythm that your body has become used to during the week.

- **Spend sufficient time in bed each night.** Your bedtime and get up time should allow adequate time for you to achieve sufficient sleep to generally feel refreshed on waking, and alert through the day. Sleep deprivation can lead to you feeling tired and/or sleepy, as well as affecting your mood and concentration. However, you should not spend excessive amounts of time in bed if you are sleeping poorly, but continue to maintain your regular routine. The purpose of this is to encourage your body to rest at the right time.

Sleeping environment

Your bedroom should be a place where you feel comfortable and at ease. It is important to establish a relaxed environment away from daytime activities. The tips below will help you to reinforce to your body that your bedroom is where you sleep.

- It should be dark with good curtains to prevent early morning sunlight coming in. An eye mask can be helpful.
- It should be quiet. Earplugs can be useful if your bed partner is restless or snores, or if you are sensitive to outside noise.
- Your bedroom should not be too hot or too cold.
- You should consider changing your bed if it is old or uncomfortable.

Avoid distractions

Don't use your bedroom for stimulating activities such as work, eating or watching television. Televisions emit bright light and noise which can stimulate your brain and stop you falling asleep or affect the quality of your sleep.

Don't be tempted to watch the clock. Turn your clock away and set the alarm. Watching the clock can increase anxiety about sleep, therefore making it harder to settle down to sleep.

Before bedtime

Caffeine (e.g. coffee, tea, cola, Redbull)

Moderate caffeine intake during the day is unlikely to disrupt your sleep; but this is a long lasting stimulant and can remain in your system for several hours causing disruption to your sleep later in the night if taken in excess. It is best not to consume caffeine after 5.00pm.

Smoking

Nicotine is also a stimulant and can affect your sleep in the same way as caffeine. It will help if you can try not to smoke close to bedtime or during the night.

Alcohol

Alcohol when consumed in large amounts can help you to feel relaxed and sleepy, however, it causes your sleep to be fragmented.

Food

It is not helpful to go to bed when you are hungry or when too full. Being hungry makes you desire food and helps to keep you alert. Eating a large meal close to bedtime can make you feel uncomfortable.

Exercise

Regular exercise is a good way to maintain general good health and a feeling of wellbeing

However, exercising too close to bedtime (within 3 hours) can stimulate your body and mind. Even if your body feels tired, your mind may remain active for some time whilst your body winds down.

Summary

- | Do | Don't |
|--|---|
| • Establish and maintain a regular bed and get up time, seven days a week. | • Don't consume caffeine after 5.00pm. |
| • Ensure your bedroom is a comfortable, quiet and relaxing place. | • Don't drink excessive amounts of alcohol particularly close to bedtime. |
| • Exercise regularly during the day. | • Try not to smoke close to bedtime. |
| • Ensure you spend adequate time in bed seven nights a week. | • Don't exercise within three hours of bedtime. |
| • Remember that sleep requirements change over a lifetime. | • Don't go to bed hungry or within two to three hours of a large meal. |
| • Remember that short awakenings are normal. | • Don't nap during the day or evening. |
| | • Don't lie in during weekends. |
| | • Don't use your bedroom for anything other than sleep and sexual activity. |

These tips, if followed closely and taken on board as a whole, have been shown to help people sleep better. However they sometimes take time and hard work before the benefits are enjoyed.

Finally

If you feel that there is anything specific that is causing you to experience poor sleep, for example, a medical condition or medication, you should talk to your doctor. Common causes of poor sleep include stress, anxiety, low mood and pain; treating any underlying condition may well help improve your sleep quality.

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