GOOD SLEEP GUIDE

This resource will explain a little bit about improving sleep and give you some tips for overcoming common sleeping difficulties.

COMMON QUESTIONS

How Much Sleep Do I Need?

Everyone differs in the amount of sleep they need. Sleep research indicates that people differ a lot in the amount of sleep they need and require less sleep as they get older.

Is My Lack of Sleep Harmful?

There is no evidence that sleep deprivation causes short- or long-term damage to the brain or body. Sleep deprived people may experience irritability, extreme sleepiness, difficulty concentrating, and reduced motivation; however, **you cannot die from lack of sleep**. Nature has provided us with an in-built mechanism that ensures we will fall asleep if we really need to. If your body really needs sleep, you can be sure that almost nothing will be able to stop it.

When is Sleeplessness a Problem?

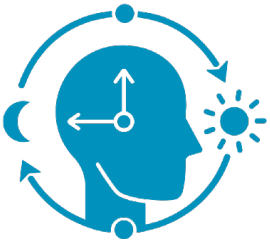
For many, sleeplessness is unpleasant and stressful. This is often due to the fact that people spend much of the time awake at night worrying. So, these people feel tired the next day partly because they slept relatively little, and partly because the worrying has exhausted them. When you can't sleep, **lying in bed worrying makes things worse**. A more effective option is to get up and do something distracting and relaxing. This way, even if you aren't sleeping, at least you are resting.

Insomnia

Insomnia is defined as a **chronic inability to sleep**. Most people with insomnia do sleep, but feel that they did not get enough sleep, or that their sleep had too many disruptions, so they don't feel refreshed in the morning. Often, it's not the lack of sleep that prompts a person to seek help, but how the person feels about and copes with their sleeplessness.

The Circadian Rhythm

All humans have a 'biological clock' (the **circadian rhythm**) that enables them to regulate things like body temperature and energy. Body temperature reaches its highest and lowest points once every 24 hours. Feelings of sleepiness rise and fall in parallel with body temperature; people typically feel most alert when their body temperature is highest and feel sleepy as their body temperature falls. The circadian rhythm influences our readiness to fall asleep by controlling variations in body temperature.



Common Causes of Sleep Disturbance

Anxiety

It can be difficult to relax after a hectic day. Many people find that they start worrying when they get into bed. These worries are often accompanied by muscle tension, which can make it even more difficult to sleep. Then people start to worry about not sleeping - it's a vicious cycle!

Caffeine

Coffee, tea, cocoa, cola drinks, energy drinks, and some over-the-counter prescriptions contain caffeine. Consuming these products, especially in the afternoon, will increase feelings of energy and wakefulness and make it more difficult to sleep.

Nicotine

Nicotine stimulates the nervous system by initiating the release of a hormone called adrenaline. Adrenaline arouses the body and mind, making you alert and ready for action. Therefore, smoking prior to bed causes increased energy and liveliness, making it difficult to fall asleep.

Alcohol

Alcohol can make you fall asleep quickly, however, it reduces your sleep quality. If you drink alcohol regularly, you might also come to depend on alcohol to reduce your anxiety and help you get to sleep. This will mean you wake up feeling unrefreshed, and are more likely to have rebound anxiety which will last throughout the day and make it even more difficult to get to sleep at night.

Being Uncomfortable

Aches, discomfort, or being too hot or cold can make it hard to relax. Ensure that all your immediate needs have been met before you try to sleep. For instance, if you're hungry, have a light snack before you go to bed. Getting to sleep is easier when you're comfortable.

Noise

Periodic loud noises, like traffic, disturb sleep. Even if you don't wake up fully, these noises can interfere with your sleep pattern. Try to reduce noise by closing windows and doors or wearing earplugs. Some people also find it useful to turn off appliances which make 'white noise' during the night (the noise that TVs and other appliances can emit even when they are off).

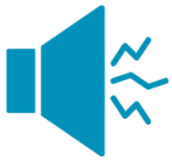
Sleeping Pills

Sleeping pills can facilitate sleep onset and decrease anxiety in the short- term. In the long-term however, these benefits disappear – you will begin to feel anxious and sleep less even though you're taking the pills. Although you might then be tempted to take more pills, the benefit of doing so won't be permanent either, resulting in a vicious cycle of addiction. **If you are currently taking sleeping pills every night to help you sleep, speak to your doctor about gradually reducing your use.**

Tips for Improving Sleep

Here's a list of things to try to improve your sleep:

- To establish and maintain a healthy circadian rhythm, go to bed at the same time every night and get up at the same time every morning. **Do not sleep late in the mornings trying to make up for lost sleep.**
- Similarly, **do not nap** during the day, no matter how tired you are during the day.



- Try to **reduce noise levels** by closing windows and doors.
- **Avoid caffeine** in the evenings, and preferably in the afternoons.
- **Get out of bed:** If you're lying in bed unable to stop thinking about things, get up and do something distracting and relaxing (e.g. read a book, listen to classical music). Don't return to bed until you feel sleepy again. If you return to bed and feel the same way, get out of bed again and do something distracting and relaxing again. You may need to do this a few times before you can get into bed and fall asleep. The whole idea is that you learn to associate bed with sleep.
- **Make time for problem solving during the day:** Set aside time where you can think of ways to solve your problems. This may require you to make decisions. This may be difficult, but avoiding facing anxious thoughts only worsens anxiety. Often the uncertainty that accompanies indecision is more stressful than the consequences of a decision! If you experience the same thoughts when you get into bed, remind yourself that you have already thought about them for today and postpone worrying until tomorrow.
- **Regular exercise** during the day or early in the evening can improve sleeping patterns (however, don't exercise late in the evening as this may make it more difficult for you to sleep).
- Develop a short and relaxing evening **routine** (including things such as washing your face and cleaning your teeth) to help you to wind down and get in the 'mood' for sleep.
- If you smoke, **abstain** for at least an hour before going to bed so that the stimulating effects of nicotine can wear off.
- **Limit alcohol consumption** to within health guidelines and do not use alcohol to help you sleep.
- Make sure all your immediate needs are met before you get into bed (e.g. make sure you're not hungry or cold).

- If you need to, **speak to your GP about stopping your use of sleeping medications.**

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