

SLEEP DIFFICULTIES

When people are under stress, preoccupied with difficult situations or have experienced some kind of crisis, it is very common for them to experience sleep difficulties. This may take the form of finding it hard to get to sleep, when the mind seems to be overactive although the body is tired. Some people are able to fall asleep only to wake up a few hours later and find their minds racing and that further sleep eludes them. Other people may wake several hours earlier than usual and be unable to get back to sleep. When people are depressed, this may be the point in the day that they feel particularly low. The menopause is also associated with poorer sleep.

There are two kinds of sleep in a normal sleep cycle. Rapid eye movement or dreaming sleep (REM) is where our brains are active, and takes up about a fifth of our sleep. In non-REM sleep, our brains are quiet, hormones are released and our bodies repair themselves. Everyone has about four or five cycles of REM and non-REM sleep a night. For older people, the amount of time spent in the deepest stages of non-REM sleep decreases – they are literally lighter sleepers.

Sleep is important because it is during this time that the body regenerates itself. The amount of sleep we need varies amongst individuals. Generally, most adults manage best on 7-8 hours a night and this reduces as we get older. It is, however, the quality of sleep that is important and 4 hours of deeper sleep may be better than 8 hours of shallow sleep.

A common feature of insomnia is worry about the consequences of lack of sleep. People frequently think that lack of sleep will make us ill or cause serious problems. Adults can, in fact, manage with little sleep for quite some time, with no drastic consequences. Worrying about lack of sleep also causes anxiety which makes sleep less likely.

Overcoming sleeplessness

General

You are more likely to sleep well if:

- You have avoided caffeine (which causes adrenalin release, stimulating bodily arousal) or a heavy meal for at least 3 hours before bedtime
- You have reduced your daily caffeine intake – and remember, tea is just as high in caffeine as coffee
- You have had some form of physical exercise during the day (preferably the afternoon) - but not just before bedtime!
- You use your bedroom only for sleeping
- You have not slept during the daytime

Bedtime routine

- Devise for yourself a routine before going to bed which helps you to unwind and calm down - this may involve reading or listening to music, having a bath or a warm, milky drink
- Try to go to bed (and get up) at roughly the same time each day in order to train your body clock
- Make sure you have a comfortable bed that is not too soft
- Bedrooms also need to be comfortable, make sure that the room is not too hot or cold and minimise distractions such as light and noise
- Watching television in bed does not usually aid sleep
- A warm bath before going to bed is an excellent soporific

A tranquil mind

Pursuing sleep is likely to keep you awake

Remind yourself that sleep will come eventually, if not tonight then tomorrow or the next night. You will not die from lack of sleep and insomnia will not harm you; and most people can manage on much less sleep than they think.

Also, you are probably getting more sleep than you think. Short periods of wakefulness seem longer than they really are.

If you find yourself going over and over your worries

- Remember that when we are tired our minds often blow things up out of all proportion, and things are always much clearer in the light of day.
- Do not try to make plans at night, fit pieces of the jigsaw together or find solutions - this is not the best time for problem solving and will impede sleep.
- On the other hand, do not try to tell yourself not to think about problems as this will not work. If something is worrying you, acknowledge the worry, tell yourself that you need a plan for sorting it out, and decide to address this tomorrow, identifying a time and place, then relax and let it wash over you. If necessary, get up and spend a few minutes jotting down how you will approach the problem tomorrow, then prepare for sleep and return to bed.
- Try to distract yourself. Having acknowledged a worry, try and focus your mind on something else - the "counting sheep" technique! Usually we need to think about something more engaging than sheep. It may be useful to focus on the last episode of your favourite soap, a recent round of golf or walk around your local park.

A relaxed body

Some people find it helpful to engage in relaxation exercises after getting into bed. Relaxation techniques have to be learned, therefore, practice is essential in mastering the art of relaxation.

Relaxation discs are readily available in the marketplace; we can also send you one on request. Use an adapted version (for lying horizontal) when you first get into bed.

What if this doesn't work?

Don't let "bed" become associated with not sleeping. If you are not asleep after what you feel is an acceptable period of time (say 20-30 minutes), get up and do something.

Sit in a chair and read, do the ironing, whatever seems appropriate. If you drink something, make sure it is not tea or coffee, both of which lead to adrenaline release and will cause bodily arousal.

After a period of time, go back to bed and go through your relaxation exercises again.

Medications

Sleeping tablets

Sleeping tablets can be helpful but should only be used as a last resort, if none of the above techniques work and your difficulty sleeping seems to be seriously affecting your daily functioning.

Sleeping tablets need to be prescribed by your GP - never take anyone else's sleeping tablets! A doctor needs to know about your health in general before prescribing what is right for you.

These medications work by depressing brain function. They are useful in re-establishing the habit of sleep but their effectiveness diminishes rapidly after the first few nights. They tend to make you feel tired and irritable the next day. Sleeping tablets can produce psychological and physical dependence when taken regularly for more than a few weeks. A particular danger is the temptation to increase the dose when the effect diminishes after several weeks. If they are withdrawn abruptly, there may be a rebound into sleeplessness, as well as other unpleasant effects including anxiety and nightmares. The dosage must be reduced gradually under a doctor's advice. Some people take a sleeping tablet on an occasional basis when they really need a full night's sleep.

Slimming tablets and street drugs will make it harder for you to sleep.

Alcohol and smoking

Some people resort to drinking alcohol before they go to sleep. This may well send them to sleep, but most people report waking later in the night; this probably being due to the toxins that the alcohol releases, the need to urinate, etc. Needless to say, alcohol can be damaging to health and plays **no part** in sleep management.

Nicotine is also a stimulant, and smoking in bed is dangerous if you fall asleep with a lit cigarette.

Alternative remedies

Homeopathic and herbal preparations help many people with insomnia. Common suggestions include essential oils (in a burner or dabbed on a pillow), herbal pillows, Valerian tablets etc.

Other sleep related conditions

Sleeping too much; the commonest reason for falling asleep during the day is not sleeping properly the previous night. However, if it goes on it may be a sign that you are physically ill, so go to your GP.

Narcolepsy (sudden, uncontrollable sleepiness in the day) is rare. Sleep apnea, whose most obvious symptom is snoring, also involves stopping breathing briefly. This will wake the sufferer, and hence they tend to feel tired the following day. There are treatments available for both of these conditions, so again, you should consult your GP.