



Simple steps to sleeping better

thesleepcharity.org.uk

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Sleep is vital for our health and wellbeing, and not only do we function less well when we don't get enough quality sleep, but it can lead to long-term health problems. That's why we need to do all that we can to ensure that we enjoy quality sleep and deal with any sleep problems.

Around 40% of the adult population suffer with sleep difficulties and it's normal to have trouble sleeping at some point in your life.

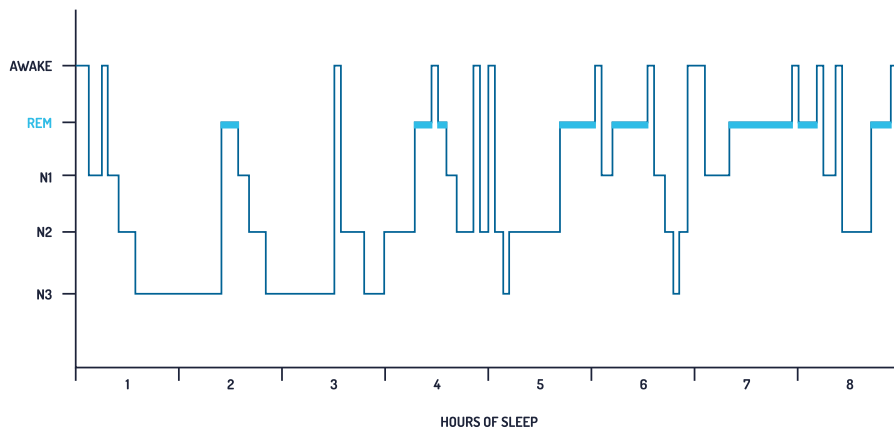
The Sleep Cycle

During sleep our heart rate drops, our body temperature falls and we experience complex changes in brain activity.

When we first fall asleep we enter non-rapid eye movement (NREM) sleep.

NREM is divided into three stages:

- NREM1
- NREM2 and
- NREM3, each stage becoming progressively 'deeper'.



- Stages 1 and 2 are light stages of sleep from which we can be easily roused.
- Stage 3 is a deeper stage of sleep from which we're more difficult to rouse, and some may feel disorientated if woken from this stage of sleep.
- Generally, after going through the NREM stages, we enter stage 4 which is known as rapid eye movement (REM) sleep. It is during the REM stage of sleep that we dream.
- Each cycle lasts approximately 90 minutes and we need to experience all four stages in order to wake up rested.
- A good night's sleep consists of five or six cycles, whereas disturbed sleep consists of far fewer.

Sleep is largely controlled by sleep pressure, and the circadian rhythm, or our body clock, which is approximately a 24 hour cycle that regulates all our biological and physiological processes. It anticipates environmental changes around us so that our bodies can adapt to them.

Our body releases melatonin, a hormone that makes us feel sleepy, when it is dark. Our circadian rhythm helps us to produce more at nighttime and reduces in the morning. After a waking period of around 15 hours the pressure to sleep becomes greater and greater, in other words, we get tired. With the onset of darkness, the circadian rhythm drops to the lowest level and helps to maintain sleep.

Causes Of Poor Sleep

- Lack of wind down routine
- Worry/anxiety
- Depression
- Pain
- Night-time urination
- Daytime drowsiness
- Alcohol/substance misuse
- Exercising close to bedtime
- Temperature regulation
- Over thinking sleep - too many rituals etc
- Irregular sleep/wake times
- Bedroom environment
- Diet
- Age
- Shift work
- Sleep disorders - OSA, restless legs
- And many more!

Sleep Needs

The amount of sleep you need depends on a number of things including your age, health and other elements, and sleep cycles change as we grow older.

While there is no magic number for how much sleep we should get, there is a general consensus that around seven to eight hours is best. Experts believe that most adults require somewhere between six and nine hours of good quality sleep in order to feel refreshed and to function well both mentally and physically.

Research seems to show that regularly sleeping less than six hours is associated with many of the adverse effects of sleep deprivation. If you do find yourself regularly getting less than six hours a night and are exhausted the next day, then it might be time to overhaul your sleep and lifestyle habits.

However it's important not to get too hung up on your sleep quantity but focus on sleep quality instead. Everyone's requirements are different - some of us cope far better on less than others while others need more. The best way to determine if you're sleeping well is to consider how you feel the next day.



Sleep Hygiene Guidelines

To ensure you experience good sleep it's important to follow good lifestyle habits and to eliminate the factors that are causing you disturbed sleep.

For example, making sure that your bedroom is a sleep promoting environment, looking at the lighting in your home, and avoiding foods and drinks that can hinder sleep.

The guidelines below are aimed at increasing or maintaining good sleep health and are not for the management of sleep disorders. Sleep health takes into account quality, quantity and timing - including its regularity - of sleep, in addition to vulnerability towards poor sleep and the impact of sleep on daytime functioning.

Making a few changes to your routine over a 24 hour period can make a huge difference to your wellbeing.



Keep a regular sleep routine

Keeping a regular sleep wake schedule helps the body's sleep system stay in harmony and promotes feelings of sleepiness and drowsiness when your body is ready for sleep.



Get out into natural daylight

Natural light (even on cloudy days) helps reset our internal body clock. It helps us get over feeling groggy when we have just woken up and makes us more alert. Get out into the natural light as soon as you can after waking up, and preferably around the same time every day.



Exercise regularly

Exercise promotes the quantity and quality of your sleep, making it deeper and more refreshing. It doesn't need to be an expensive gym membership - a walk outside, a run or a cycle are equally beneficial. However, a few studies have shown that exercising too close to bedtime can prevent sleep so we suggest leaving a window of at least two hours before bedtime without exercise.



Avoid stimulants eight hours before bedtime

Although there are significant individual differences in how caffeine affects each of us, give yourself enough time between your last caffeine intake and your sleep time to make sure that it does not interfere with your ability to get off to sleep.



Where possible, don't go to bed full, hungry or thirsty

Eating at regular times helps strengthen our internal body clock. However, eating a heavy meal before bedtime can make it challenging to sleep at night. Drinking lots of liquid before bed will also increase the chances that we have to go to the bathroom during the night. Conversely, being hungry or thirsty at night can increase the chances of waking up. A balance should be struck between being satisfied but not full up before we go to bed.



Be screen savvy

Using electronic screens just before bed and in the bedroom can keep us awake for longer as the blue light from these devices has the capacity to prevent the hormones that make us sleepy from being produced. Importantly, it is not just the light that can affect our sleep, but most activities that we use our devices for can be highly stimulating and keep us awake and alert.



Don't use alcohol to sleep

Although alcohol is a sedative, it can have a significant impact on the quality and quantity of your sleep. Our sleep tends to become fragile and light when we have a lot of alcohol in the evening and can lead to lots of awakenings in the latter part of the night and feelings of being unrefreshed during the day.



Avoid nicotine before bed

Nicotine is a short-acting stimulant that can keep you awake and so should be avoided in the later part of the evening and during the night if you happen to wake up.



Keep your bedroom cool, dark and quiet

Heat, light and noise can impact on our ability to get off to sleep and increase the chances that we wake in the night. Making sure the bedroom is cool, dark and quiet can improve the quality of our sleep as can sleeping on a comfortable, supportive bed. You may not always be able control external environmental factors (e.g. noise from a busy road) but you can take steps to help reduce them (e.g. ear plugs)



Hide the clock

It is common to watch the clock when we are awake at night. For some of us, this can increase our anxiety levels and further prevent us from being able to fall asleep. It is not necessary to remove the clock altogether as many people rely upon their alarm clocks to get them up in the morning. However, having the clock face out of sight will help reduce any sleep anxiety.

Signposting

If you remain concerned about your sleep, you should make sure you see your GP.



Further Reading

- Sleep Charity website
- NHS
- Sleepio
- Hope2Sleep



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