

# Sleep Hygiene



## Sleep is one of the cornerstones of physical and mental health

Science has now established that sleep strengthens your immune system. It can also improve memory and your ability to think clearly.

Impaired sleep can affect stress-related disorders such as heart disease or constipation and a persistent lack of sleep has a cumulative effect which can lead to exhaustion, poor concentration or depression. So sleep has a huge potential impact on health.

## What happens during sleep?

It is more complicated than turning the brain off and having a rest! Every night we require two types of sleep - Slow Wave Sleep (SWS) and Rapid Eye Movement Sleep (REM), so called because our eyes dart around behind our eyelids during this phase. Dreaming happens during REM sleep. SWS is required to repair and replace worn out tissues/cells in our bodies, sugars are produced to recharge brain cells, and our immune system is refuelled. It is now believed that the dreaming occurring during REM sleep is required by the brain - it acts like a stress 'safety-valve' allowing us to process the emotional concerns of the day.

So to use the analogy of a computer: SWS repairs the hardware, whilst our dream sleep 'defrags' our software (thoughts and emotions.)

A good night's sleep varies from one person to the next. Young adults on average sleep for about 8-9 hours, whilst older people need 6.5 hours per night.

## Sleep difficulties and why they occur

The majority of people experience difficulty sleeping at some time. Common difficulties can include:

- taking a long time to get to sleep
- frequent/prolonged waking during the night
- waking early
- not feeling rested on waking
- sleeping too much

Under normal conditions, our sleepiness should gradually increase through the day, peaking just before we go to bed at night. There are however, many things that can stop/disrupt that natural sleeping process from occurring.

### Mind

The most common cause is unstoppable thoughts running through your mind at night due to stress, unresolved or anxiety-provoking issues, or stimulating activities which keep you alert or 'on the edge of your seat' prior to bed time.

### Body

Physical pain/discomfort (such as restless leg syndrome or itching), exercising too late in the evening, indigestion or eating too late, too much caffeine/alcohol/nicotine (all of which are stimulants), withdrawal symptoms from antidepressants/anti-anxiety/sleeping drugs (and some illicit drugs), sleep apnoea (momentarily ceasing to breathe, every so often), or raised body temperature.

### Environment

Noise in/outside home, bed/mattress comfort, snoring partner, music, light, and room temperature (too hot/cold).

The good news is that there is a range of strategies and techniques that you can learn and use to restore your sleep health.

### Environmental factors

Two factors that frequently prevent sleep are light and temperature.

### Light

We have a pea-sized gland in the middle of our brain, sensitive to light and dark. At night, as it gets dark this pineal gland starts producing a hormone called melatonin and releases it into the blood making us feel sleepy. Normally, the melatonin levels will stay elevated for about 12 hours (usually 9pm - 9am), then as the sun rises the pineal gland 'turns off' the melatonin production. It is thought this helps to maintain daily body rhythms.

The use of light-emitting electronic gadgets (phone/TV/computer) before bed, or switching on main lights during the night can interrupt this. Maintaining a dark room will make a real difference to the quality of your sleep, so use blackout blinds/eye mask if necessary.

Electro-magnetic fields (EMF) can also disrupt the pineal gland, Moving mobile phones, portable phone bases, wireless routers and other electronic devices which may emit EMF away from the bed and switching off as many electrical devices as possible (e.g. 1V in the bedroom) is advised.

### Temperature

The ideal room temperature to promote sound sleep is actually quite cool: 15.5-20 degrees centigrade, according to studies. Keeping your room cooler/hotter can lead to restless sleep. Scientists believe it may help for the room temperature to mimic your bodies' own naturally lowered temperature at night, making it most conducive to sleep.

## Sleep Hygiene

Sleep refers to lifestyle choices as well as environmental factors that can affect our sleep. The following guidelines may help to promote an improved sleep pattern:

### Bedroom

If possible use the bedroom primarily for sleeping so that the brain makes that association. Your bed, mattress and pillows need to be comfortable and supportive. Wear earplugs if your partner snores, or noises disturb you from outside.

### Exercise

Regular exercise earlier in the day, preferably outdoors in the fresh air and sunlight may deepen sleep, but don't exercise within 2 hours of bedtime, as it may keep you awake.

### Diet

A heavy meal too close to bedtime will interfere with sleep. A high protein snack and small piece of fruit in the evening can be sleep-inducing as it assists in the production of melatonin and serotonin. Snacks of grains/sugar should be avoided before bed as they can raise the blood sugar and delay sleep. Try a milky drink or camomile tea before bedtime, but ensure the majority of your fluid intake is earlier in the day to minimise trips to the bathroom.

### Caffeine

This is a central nervous system stimulant which can delay the onset of sleep or cause wakefulness. It is wise to avoid food containing caffeine such as coffee, tea, chocolate or cola 4-6 hours before bedtime or during the night if you wake up.

### Nicotine

Needs to be limited at bedtime as it also stimulates the central nervous system. Although many people say that cigarettes help them to relax, the overall effect is of stimulation not relaxation.

### Alcohol

Depresses the central nervous system and although it may speed up the onset of sleep, once the alcohol is metabolised during the night, your body is in withdrawal - which can wake you up. Alcohol will also stop you from entering the deeper stages of sleep, when your body does most of its healing.

### Sex

Sex and physical intimacy is good. Although sex stimulates, it discharges energy and promotes relaxation as a prelude to sleep.

### Unresolved worries

Can often stop us getting to sleep or revisit us during the small hours - when they seem bigger/more frightening. It is a good rule to discuss such things earlier in the day when we can think more clearly, not just before bed/during the night. Sometimes it helps to write down a list of worries which allows you to 'park' them for the night and address them tomorrow. Various relaxation and breathing techniques can help.

### Tip

Taking a warm bath or shower an hour or so before bed results in a drop in body temperature, which signals bedtime and facilitates sleep.

Choose bed clothes that enable effective control of your body temperature at night, with the window open if desired.

## Establishing an Optimal sleep pattern

### Efficient sleeping

- Your sleep pattern is optimal when it is both efficient and regular.
- Efficiency is measured by the time you are asleep when in bed.
- Establish a regular time to go to bed and get up each day, helping your body and brain get into a sleep rhythm - making it easier to fall asleep.

### Daytime sleeping/napping

- At certain times, for example during/after treatment, you may feel the need to nap during the day. Try to do this straight after lunch and limit the length of time for a nap to a maximum of one hour. This will not affect your night time sleep.
- Relax in a chair instead of going to bed.

### Not sleeping enough

- Pain can have an effect on your sleep pattern
- Relaxation and breathing techniques can help with pain and insomnia
- Regular exercise can help by increasing the depth of your sleep.
- Discuss pain management with you GP or Nurse Specialist

### Sleeping too long

Sleeping for longer than you need to may contribute to feeling exhausted in the morning. If so ....

- Cut down on your sleep time gradually - either by getting up half an hour earlier or going to bed half an hour later.
- Establish set waking and going to bed times and be consistent.
- Don't compromise by increasing time in bed, even if you still feel tired.

### Practice relaxation and breathing techniques

Whether it is difficult getting off to sleep at the beginning or in the middle of the night due to pain/muscle tension/anxiety, or you just need to relax during the day, here are a few easy and effective methods that will help:

- Practice relaxation regularly so that you know you can use it when you need to lower anxiety or tension, go to sleep or manage your emotions
- Listen to your favourite music or a relaxation CD of your choice
- Find enjoyable ways to unwind
- Guided use of your imagination

### Complementary Therapies and Sleep

Complementary Therapies are widely used for their ability to help with relaxation, sleep and an enhanced sense of well being. Whilst there are some cautions around their use, the following suggestions can be used safely with care. Should you have any doubts, seek advice from your Complementary Therapist or health care team.

Some examples of therapies that can aid sleep are:

- Massage
- Aromatherapy
- Reiki
- Reflexology
- Use of acupressure