

Sleeping Difficulties

This fact sheet will give some background information about sleeping problems, self-help and how to find help. Some of the content has been drawn from the National Mind booklet called 'How to cope with sleep problems': www.mind.org.uk/help/diagnoses_and_conditions/sleep_problems

How much sleep do I need?

Usually, about seven or eight hours a night is enough for the average adult, but a small number of people need more than ten hours or fewer than five. At least one sleep expert believes we could all get by on six hours of 'core sleep', with the emphasis being on quality rather than quantity.

The amount of sleep we need, and its pattern, changes with age. Small babies sleep for around 17 hours each day, in several short bursts. Young children need a nap during the day to make a total of nine or ten hours. In healthy adults, between 19 and 30 years old, seven or eight hours sleep a night is usually enough. After the age of 50, this average falls to six hours, or less. Older people often revert to sleeping for several shorter stretches.

Can lack of sleep harm me?

Losing a night's sleep once in a while won't cause lasting damage. During stressful times, when starting a new job or sitting exams, people can go for several nights with as little as two or three hours a night. Once the pressure is off, most of them return to their normal sleeping pattern. But some people develop more lasting problems, which can lead to fatigue during the day, and cause irritability and difficulty concentrating. This can be dangerous, especially when people are driving, operating machinery or doing other skilled tasks.

I feel exhausted all the time. Do I have insomnia?

If you're feeling tired, irritable and having problems concentrating, you may automatically put it down to not getting enough sleep. But, studies have shown that people who believe that they have long-term insomnia may actually be getting only 40 minutes less sleep per night than other people. You may also be suffering from depression (Link to factsheet on Depression) or a physical illness.

What can trigger insomnia?

There are many triggers for poor sleep: for instance your sleeping conditions may be too hot, too cold; certain prescription drugs can cause disturbed sleep; jet lag or shift work; alcohol, nicotine and caffeine; emotional problems; or noise disturbance such as traffic.

What about other sleep problems?

You may have nightmares if you are stressed, anxious or depressed, or if you are withdrawing from drugs, such as minor tranquillisers or antidepressants. They are also common following a traumatic event.

Sleep walking and night terrors occur during deep sleep, and may be caused by stress, or when normal sleep patterns have been broken (when doing shift work, for instance). Night terrors can accompany sleepwalking, or may occur on their own. During these brief episodes, the dreamer may scream and seem very frightened, although they are not fully awake. Both sleepwalking and night terrors are more common in children, who often grow out of them. Take any necessary precautions, such as having stair gates and locking doors and windows.

During the dreaming (REM) phase of sleep, limb muscles are limp and paralysed, but if something suddenly disturbs you, your mind may wake up before your body does, and so, for a few seconds, you become aware of your inability to move and may be unnerved by it. Usually, such episodes are very brief, ending when you become fully awake.

People sometimes have brief hallucinations as they are falling asleep or while they are waking up. They aren't a sign that anything is wrong, but may occur, for example, when looking after a wakeful baby, or when sleep is similarly disrupted.

Extreme daytime sleepiness may be caused by narcolepsy. Those who are affected fall asleep frequently, throughout the day, and experience vivid images and voices as they are dropping off. While this is happening, they may twitch, their eyes may jerk and their muscles lose power. They may also have hallucinations, which may last longer or be more elaborate than the brief hallucinations mentioned above. Sleep paralysis is also more common and longer lasting.

People with sleep apnoea condition tend to snore very loudly and to stop breathing for very short periods, during the night. They wake, briefly, when this happens, and so may become tired the following day. The condition is more common among the overweight, and with increasing age.

How can I improve my sleep?

The key to feeling refreshed is having a regular pattern, not how many hours of sleep you get. If you go to bed before you're really tired, and then sleep badly, you'll tend to stay in bed later in the morning, which will affect the next night's sleep, and so on. The following steps can help you establish a good pattern.

- Establishing a routine
- Go to bed only when you really feel tired enough to sleep.
- Don't read, watch television or use your computer in bed. These are waking activities.
- If you don't fall asleep within 20 minutes, get up and relax in another room. Do something soothing, such as listening to music, until you're tired enough to go back to bed.
- Repeat this process, if you are awake for long periods.
- Set the alarm at the same time each morning. Don't sleep in late to make up for a bad night. This will only make it harder to sleep the following night. You may need to follow this programme for several weeks, to establish a regular pattern.

- Avoid taking a nap during the day. But if you really are overtired, taking a short nap after lunch can be beneficial.
- After a long flight, you need to get your body clock in tune with local time. However tired you feel, avoid going to bed until the local bedtime, and get up reasonably early the next morning. You should then quickly adjust to a new pattern.

Sleep aids

Look at your sleeping arrangements. Is your bed and bedding comfortable? Do the temperature and light levels suit you? Is there enough fresh air in the room? If you are easily bothered by noise, try using earplugs.

Try setting aside some time during the early evening for reflecting on your day. Think over any difficulties and write down your next steps. This may help you to avoid focusing on problems when you go to bed. You could listen to the radio quietly, or have a bath; avoid any complicated work or activity. Practise a relaxation technique before you go to bed. Breathe slowly and deeply: four seconds in, hold for four seconds and then four seconds out. Consciously tense and relax your muscles, in turn; start with your toes and work up. Interrupt unwanted thoughts by repeating a soothing word (such as 'peace') over and over to yourself. Try visualising a scene landscape that has pleasant memories for you.

Hop pillows, or a few drops of lavender oil in the bath or on your pillow, may help you relax, unless you are allergic to lavender. A hot, milky drink may encourage sleep, but again many people are allergic to milk and this can make them snore. Try an allergy test before doing this. If you wake during the night, go through your relaxation routine.

Life-style improvements

- Avoid coffee, tea, cocoa, cola and other drinks containing caffeine. Try decaffeinated coffee and herbal teas, instead.
- Limit alcohol in the evening to one or two drinks.
- Get enough exercise. Fit people sleep better, on the whole, and if you haven't had any exercise during the day, it will be more difficult to sleep soundly. Consider changing your habits and going for a walk in the early evening.
- Eat only a light meal in the evening, and avoid snacks.
- Yoga and meditation are also useful methods for combating stress.

If self-help fails, what else can I do?

If you haven't yet done so, it may be a good idea to see your GP, so that any physical problems can be eliminated. It may be appropriate to have a blood test to check your thyroid function. If you feel that depression, or any other emotional problems, may be causing your difficulties, or if you are suffering from nightmares, you could consider talking to a counsellor or psychotherapist. Your GP may be able to refer you.

Sleeping pills

These can help if you're experiencing acute stress, caused by a crisis or a bereavement. They are sometimes prescribed to try and break a bad sleep habit. But sleeping pills should not be prescribed for more than a few days, because they may be addictive. Their effectiveness decreases over time, and people may experience 'rebound' insomnia when they stop taking them. Newer sleeping pills are said to cause less dependency, but such claims should be treated with caution.

Sleep clinics

These are used to assess insomnia and other sleep problems, such as narcolepsy or apnoea, and involve spending several nights in a sleep laboratory, wired up to a polygraph machine that monitors

your sleep. (It may be possible to use one in your own home.) However there are very few clinics where you would be observed overnight.

Useful Organisations

British Sleep Society

A professional organisation who aim is to improve public health by promoting education and research to sleep professionals on sleep and its disorders.

c/o EBS, City Wharf, Davidson Road, Lichfield, Staffs. WS14 9DZ

Tel: 01543 442156

Email: admin@sleepsociety.org.uk

Web: www.sleepsociety.org.uk

Battle Against Tranquillisers (BAT)

Helps people withdraw from benzodiazepines.

PO Box 658, Bristol BS99 1XP

tel. 0117 9690303 helpline: 0844 826 9317

Email: support@bataid.org

Web: www.bataid.org

British Snoring and Sleep Apnoea Association

Information, advice and counselling

Chapter House, 33 London Road, Reigate RH2 9HZ

Tel: 01737 245638, Fax: 0870 052 9212

Email info@britishsnoring.co.uk

Web: www.britishsnoring.co.uk

Narcolepsy Association UK (UKAN)

Charity offering information and advice about narcolepsy

PO BOX 26865, Kirkcaldy, KY2 9BX

Tel. 0345 450 0394

Web: www.narcolepsy.org.uk

Email: info@narcolepsy.org.uk

Sleep Disorders Centre

requiring a doctor's referral.

Lane Fox Unit, Ground floor, South Wing, Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7EH

Tel: 020 7188 3430 / 8832

Web: www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/our-services/sleep-disorders-centre/patients.aspx

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