

## Getting a good nights sleep

# FACTSHEET

Sleep problems can happen to people of all ages but are more common in people who are in their mid to late stages of life. Women are more likely to develop sleep problems but they are also experienced by men. At least 1 in 10 people suffer from sleep problems on a regular basis and it is estimated that 25% of the population experience sleep problems occasionally.

### WHAT HAPPENS DURING SLEEP?

Sleep allows our bodies and minds to rest, repair and restore. Sleep is not like a light bulb which is either on or off, but has different stages, varying from light to deep sleep. At least five different types or stages of sleep have been identified. Broadly, sleep is divided into what is called REM (Rapid Eye Movement) and non-REM sleep. REM sleep occurs several times during the night and is where most dreaming is thought to take place. Non-REM sleep is divided into four stages, each stage being a bit deeper, almost like a staircase of sleep.

**Stage 1\*** Very light sleep, muscle activity slows down and the body begins to relax. People can be easily awakened at this stage.

**Stage 2\*** Light sleep, breathing pattern and heart rate slows down. There is a slight decrease in body temperature.

**Stage 3\*** Deep sleep begins, heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature continues to fall. It becomes difficult to awaken someone at this stage.

**Stage 4\*** Very deep sleep, rhythmic breathing & limited muscle activity.

**Stage 5** REM sleep (Rapid Eye Movement). Muscles relax, heart rate increases, breathing is rapid and shallow. We may experience dreams during REM sleep.

\*Stages 1–4  
are Non-REM

It is estimated that we go through the 5 stages of sleep 4–5 times a night and that each sleep cycle lasts for roughly 90 minutes. People who suffer from sleep problems spend less of their sleep cycle in Stage 4 and the REM stage of sleep, meaning that they are not getting the deepest levels of sleep needed to rest, repair and restore our body.

### HOW MUCH SLEEP IS ENOUGH?

On average, people sleep between 7–9 hours a night. This doesn't mean that everyone must be sleeping between 7–9 hours or that if they don't it means they have problems with too little sleep. Each person will find a level of sleep that is enough for them to wake up, feel refreshed and not feel tired during the day. Some people can function well with only 5–6 hours of sleep a day; others need up to 10 hours. It is important that you find your own level.

## WHAT CAUSES SLEEP PROBLEMS?

As we get older most of us will need less sleep and sleep less deeply, but for some there maybe additional problems.

### MEDICAL / PHYSICAL HEALTH REASONS

#### MORE LOO TRIPS

The need to go to the toilet during the night occurs more in later life. Getting out of bed at night isn't always a great problem, but can be frustrating if it is difficult to get back to sleep.

#### PHYSICAL PAIN

This can be common in older age with joint pains such as arthritis. Other health problems can also affect sleep, for example diabetes, high blood pressure and breathing difficulties.

### EMOTIONAL AND MENTAL WELL-BEING

#### STRESS, ANXIETY AND WORRY

Sleep is easily affected by how someone is feeling. If someone is worrying about something or suffering from stress, very often they will find it hard to get off to sleep. If you have recently had a stressful life event, for example, losing a loved one, the end of a relationship or moving home, your sleep may be disturbed. Generally your sleep will go back to normal once the stress has reduced, but some people will continue to have difficulty sleeping.

#### DEPRESSION AND LOW MOOD

When someone is feeling depressed, disturbed sleep is common. It is quite usual for a person who is depressed to wake up early in the morning and find it hard to get back to sleep, or alternatively to have difficulty getting off to sleep.

#### SURROUNDINGS & BEDTIME ROUTINE

Poor bedtime routine can also cause sleep problems. If you nap during the day, it is very likely that you will not sleep well at night. Going to bed too early may result in you lying in bed awake for a long time before falling asleep or waking up early and feeling tired later in the day. Environmental factors can also cause sleep problems, for example, if you live on a noisy street, have an uncomfortable bed, or curtains that let light in.

#### DISRUPTED SLEEP ROUTINE

Working shifts which change frequently or frequently flying across time zones can affect your sleeping pattern.

#### UNHEALTHY LIFESTYLE

A poor diet or unhealthy lifestyle can lead to sleep problems. Drinking sugary or caffeinated drinks or eating a large meal before bed can stop you from falling asleep. While it has been shown that exercise can help you sleep, working out before bed will stop you from falling asleep due to the adrenaline moving around your body.

#### ALCOHOL

Even a couple of drinks can interfere with the normal sleep process. Drinking alcohol before bed will decrease the amount of REM sleep; REM sleeping is important in the repairing and restoring our bodies during sleep. A lack of REM sleep will also impact your body over the next day. Depending on the amount of alcohol you drink you can cause further fragmentation of your sleep cycles, which can have daytime symptoms of decreased concentration, fatigue and dizziness. Excessive drinking can also cause a 'hangover', leading to other physical symptoms as well as irritability and low mood.

When you drink more than usual, you may have to get up in the night to go to the toilet. Alcohol is a diuretic, which means it encourages the body to lose extra fluid (on top of what alcohol you have been drinking) through sweat and urine too, making you dehydrated and feeling worse the next day. Drinking can also make you snore loudly as it relaxes the muscles in your body. This means the tissue in your throat, mouth and nose can stop air flowing smoothly, and can create the snoring noise through vibration.

## WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF SLEEP PROBLEMS?

Trouble getting to sleep

Sleeping lightly

Waking repeatedly through the night

Sleeping too much

Waking up early

Sleeping in the day

## HOW CAN I IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF MY SLEEP?

### AVOID CAFFEINE AND NICOTINE

It is best to avoid consuming any caffeine (tea, coffee, sweets, fizzy drinks, some medications) or nicotine (cigarettes) for at least 4-6 hours before bed. These substances are stimulants and interfere with your ability to sleep.

### AVOID ALCOHOL

It is best to avoid alcohol for at least 4-6 hours before going to bed.

### EAT RIGHT

A healthy balanced diet will help you to sleep well, but timing is important. Some people find an empty stomach at bedtime very distracting, but a heavy meal before bed time can also interrupt sleep.

### BED IS FOR SLEEPING

Try not to use your bed for anything other than sleeping and sex, so that your body comes to associate bed with sleep. Avoid all technology in your rooms e.g. phones, laptops and TVs!!

### NO NAPS

It's best to avoid taking naps during the day to make sure that you are tired at bed time. If you can't make it throughout the day without a nap, make sure it's for no longer than 1 hour and before 3pm.

### EXERCISE

Regular exercise is a good idea to help with good sleep, but try not to do strenuous exercise in the 4 hours before bedtime.

### THE RIGHT SPACE

It is important that your bed and bedroom are comfortable for sleeping. A cooler room with blankets to stay warm is best, and make sure you have good curtains to block out any early morning light.

### ESTABLISH A ROUTINE

Try to go to bed and get up at the same time every day (even weekends and days off!) to help your body establish a routine. You can develop your own rituals / routines to remind your body that it is time to sleep. Some people find doing relaxing stretches or breathing exercises helpful for 15 minutes each night.

### USE A SLEEP DIARY

A sleep diary can be a useful way of making sure you have the facts right about your sleep, rather than making assumptions about the amount of sleep that is best for you.