

Sleep problemsⁱ

Sleep problems can be overcome

Insomnia is the most common type of sleep problem. It is very distressing when others do not understand the difficulties that you are having with sleep and how it can affect your life. The good news is that **you can** overcome your sleep problems.

About sleep

The amount of sleep that people need varies considerably. Most adults sleep between seven and eight hours at night. However, it is usual for some people to have less sleep without being badly affected. Often, people over 60 complain of having sleep problems, mainly because they have noticed that they are sleeping less. This change in sleep patterns is common and is a natural part of ageing.

It doesn't matter how much you sleep, what is more important is how well you feel physically and mentally as a result of your sleep pattern.

Effects of poor sleep

If you do have a sleep problem, it is very likely that you are experiencing mental and physical problems as a result. You might have difficulties with concentration and this can create problems while you are driving or at work.

Some of the effects of poor sleep can include:

- falling asleep during the day
- feelings of tiredness
- poor concentration
- memory problems
- problems in making decisions
- irritability
- frustration
- increased risk of accidents and injury.

About medication

It is important to note that medication alone will not cure your sleep problem. Long-term use can lead to dependence, which means when you stop using the medication your problems can become much worse. If you are going to use medication, only short-term or intermittent use is recommended. For example, someone who has suffered a loss may find it difficult to sleep and may benefit from the short-term (a few days to two to three weeks) use of sleeping pills as needed.

Keep in mind that sleeping pills:

- can be addictive
- can interact in a harmful way with alcohol and other drugs, which can cause problems in elderly people
- can be harmful to your baby if you are pregnant.

What may be causing your sleep problem?

There can be many causes of sleep problems. Sleep problems can be caused by physical illness, emotional factors or lifestyle factors such as too much coffee or tea, environmental factors like noisy streets, overcrowding or pollution or by a sleep disorder, such as sleep apnoea.

Physical causes

Physical illness and medications are known to affect sleep. If you have a long-term physical problem or you have been taking medication for some time, your sleep can be affected in an ongoing way. Have a look at the list below, and mark any item that is relevant to you. If there are others, write them in the space below.

Possible physical causes:

- Indigestion
- Headaches
- Backache
- Arthritis
- Heart disease
- Diabetes
- Asthma
- Sinusitis
- Ulcers
- Other physical illness

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If you have marked any of the above, you should consult your doctor. Although it may not be possible to cure a chronic illness, there might be better ways to manage the symptoms so it is less disruptive to your sleep.

Emotional causes

It is more common to experience sleep problems when feeling depressed, anxious or angry. Think about your situation, read through the list below and mark those items that apply. If you have another emotional problem that is not listed, write it in the space below.

Possible emotional causes:

- Feeling stressed
- Worrying a lot
- Feeling tense or anxious
- Feeling sad or depressed
- Anger
- Other

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If you have marked any of the above, we recommend that you discuss your feelings with your health worker. You might also want to try the relaxation exercise and other strategies outlined in the leaflet *How to get a better night's sleep*.

Lifestyle causes

Lifestyle causes of sleep problems are very common. Read the list and mark items that apply. If you are aware of other lifestyle causes, write them in the space below.

Possible lifestyle causes:

- Drinking coffee or tea
- Drinking alcohol late at night
- Eating just before sleep
- Late dinners, going to sleep on full stomach
- Smoking a lot of cigarettes
- Strenuous physical activity before going to sleep
- Too much mental activity before sleep
- Too little exercise during the day
- Shift work
- Daytime naps
- Not having regular times for going to sleep
- Not having regular times for waking up

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If you have marked any of the above, we recommend you try some of the strategies in the section 'How to get a better night's sleep'.

Environmental causes

- Noisy sleep environment
- Too much light in sleep environment
- Pollution
- Overcrowding

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If you have marked any of the above, we recommend you try some of the strategies in the section 'How to get a better night's sleep'.

Sleep disorders

It is important to determine whether you are suffering from a specific sleep disorder in addition to other possible causes. Think about the following questions.

- ➔ Has anyone told you that your snoring is loud and disruptive?
If so, you might be suffering from sleep apnoea. This is a dangerous condition in which you stop breathing during sleep. There are effective treatments for this condition.

→ Have you ever experienced sudden attacks of irresistible sleepiness during the day in which you could not stay awake?

If so, you may be suffering from narcolepsy in which people feel forced to sleep for a period ranging from a few seconds to half an hour. This can be dangerous, particularly when driving or operating machinery. However, the condition responds to medication.

→ Do you experience uncomfortable feelings in your legs or feet before falling asleep? Does strong movement ease the discomfort? Has anyone told you that your muscles twitch or jerk?

If the answer is yes to any of these questions, you may have 'nocturnal myoclonus' in which there are numerous episodes of muscle twitching during the night. This condition can be treated with medication.

You should consult your doctor if you have answered 'yes' to any of the above questions.

If you are not able to find the cause of your problem, you should consult your doctor. Using a sleep diary can help you identify possible causes. Once the problem is identified, it will be possible to work out a solution to help you get back to a regular sleep routine.

Sleep diary

Keeping this sleep diary can help you identify possible causes of your sleep problem. It can also be a useful way of keeping track of your progress.

Date	Time of getting to bed	Time taken to fall asleep	No. of awakenings	Time spent awake during night	Time of awakening in morning	Time of getting up	Naps	Exercise (type and duration)	Drugs, alcohol and caffeine	Significant events today
6/2/99	10.45pm	11.30pm	Two	30 mins	6.50am	7.15am	2-3pm 7-7.20pm	Walking (30mins)	Two cups coffee, 15 cigs, one red wine	Job interview

How to get a better night's sleep

The following pages outline a number of good sleep habits, as well as some of the most common causes of sleep disturbance. Practical guidelines for dealing with these disturbances are also covered. It is important that you read all of this section since most sleeping difficulties result from a number of different factors which all work together to disrupt your sleep.

Remember to get a friend or a family member to help and support you.

Establish a regular waking time

Establishing a regular sleep–wake pattern is very important, especially waking up at the same time each morning. The time that you wake helps to set (or synchronise) all of your body's circadian rhythms. In fact, you should try not to vary the time of day that you get up by more than one hour, even across the weekends. In particular, avoid laying in bed until 12 noon on the weekend if you get up at 6 o'clock each weekday morning for work.

Establish a proper sleep environment

1. Comfort

The discomfort caused by a rumbling stomach, persistent aches and pains, or being too hot or cold, can prevent you from relaxing enough to fall asleep. Therefore, it is necessary that all your immediate needs have been met before you try to sleep. If you are hungry, have a light snack or a warm milk drink (caffeine-free) before you go to bed. If you are in pain, take a mild pain reliever. It is much easier to sleep if you are comfortable.

2. Noise

Noise during the night (such as traffic) is another common source of sleep disturbance. Even if you do not awaken and cannot remember the noises the next day, the noises can interfere with your normal sleep pattern. If you sleep in a place that tends to be noisy, try to shut out sound by closing windows and doors, wearing earplugs, or sound-proofing the room. Even if you think that you cannot fall sleep without a radio or television in the background, remember that this noise will disrupt your sleep during the night. A clock radio that will automatically turn itself off may be useful.

3. Light

A light room will make it more difficult for you to sleep. Therefore, if you have trouble sleeping, it will be helpful to darken the room before going to bed and to ensure that the morning light does not wake you up in the morning. If you have a tendency to oversleep, it may be helpful to allow the light to enter the bedroom in the morning.

Allow a wind-down time before sleep

Make sure that you stop work at least 30 minutes before you go to bed and do something different and non-stressful, such as reading, watching television, or listening to music.

Use your bed only for sleep

Your bedroom should only be used for sleep, and of course sexual activity (which may help you to sleep). Activities such as eating, working, watching television, reading,

drinking, arguing, or discussing the days problems should be done elsewhere, because their associated arousal may interfere with you getting to sleep. These activities also make you associate your bed with wakefulness and alertness rather than drowsiness and sleep onset. It may be useful to remove all objects in your bedroom that are not associated with sleep.

Do not stay in bed when you are not asleep

If you have been having problems falling asleep, only go to bed when you are sleepy. If you do not fall asleep in about 10 minutes, get up and go to another room. Stay up until sleepy and only then return to your bed to sleep. If you return to bed and still cannot sleep, repeat the preceding instruction. Do this as often as is necessary to fall asleep in 10 minutes.

Coping with worry and anxiety

One of the most common causes of sleep disturbance is anxiety. Many people find it difficult to wind down when they climb into bed at night after a hectic day. Often this is the first chance they have had to think about things that are concerning them. People can find themselves lying in bed worrying about their problems when they would really rather be asleep. The feelings of tension and arousal that accompany these thoughts make it more difficult to fall asleep; therefore, these individuals also begin to worry about their sleeplessness as well as their other problems. They may end up tossing and turning well into the night. If you think you are having trouble sleeping because you are anxious about things that are happening in your life, there are two things you can do to improve your sleep.

1. Set aside time for problem solving during the day

Bed is not the place for thinking about things that distress you. If you do not normally find time during the day for thinking about things that are happening in your life then you need to set aside a time each day to do so. It should be a time when you are alone. Try to think of ways to resolve your problems. Usually this will require you to make decisions, some of which may be difficult because they concern important features of your life such as family and work. However, putting off stressful decisions only extends your feelings of anxiety. In most cases, the uncertainty that accompanies difficult decisions is much more stressful and unpleasant than living with the outcome of the decision once the decision is made. Talk to your health worker if you would like more information about useful problem solving techniques.

2. Learn to relax

Learning ways to relax can help sleep problems. There are many relaxation techniques. Here, we will give you a breathing relaxation technique from which you will benefit:

- ➔ Breathe in slowly to the count of three seconds.
- ➔ When you get to three, slowly breathe out to the count of three seconds.
- ➔ Pause for three seconds before breathing in again
- ➔ After five minutes or so, say the word 'relax' to yourself as you breathe out
 - Breathe in using your abdomen (not your chest) and through your nose
 - Practise five to ten minutes at night in a comfortable chair
 - Keep in mind that the benefits of relaxation will not occur unless you practise
 - Do not try hard to relax or to sleep; just carry out the exercise.

3. *Get out of bed*

If you find yourself unable to stop worrying about things when you are in bed, get up and do something that is distracting yet relaxing, like knitting, listening to music, or reading a book. You may even want to listen to a relaxation tape. Do not return to bed until you feel sleepy again. When you do go back to bed, if you find that you are still worried and sleepless, get out of bed again and do something relaxing (as above) until you are sleepy enough to return to bed once more. At first, you may find you need to get out of bed a number of times before you are finally able to fall asleep. The important thing is that you will learn to associate your bed with sleep and not with worry.

Avoid napping during the day

It is not uncommon for people who have had a particularly bad night's sleep to feel sleepy the next day. This daytime sleepiness can make it very tempting for you to take a nap in the middle of the day or early afternoon. However, if you have insomnia and nap in the afternoon, you make it much more likely that you will have another night of poor sleep. This is because when it comes to time for bed you will be less tired and will need less sleep because you have slept during the day. You will probably take longer to fall asleep and you will awaken more frequently during the night. The next day you are likely to feel sleepy again and will be tempted to have another daytime nap.

As you can see, this pattern of napping soon becomes a vicious cycle that makes your original sleeping problem even worse. If you have insomnia, no matter how tired you are during the day, try to avoid daytime naps (unless you are doing shift work). Stick to regular sleep times by going to bed at the same time every night and waking up at the same time every morning. If you cannot get to sleep until later than your normal sleep time, do not sleep late the next morning — get up at your normal waking time. By following these instructions, you will help to ensure that your natural body rhythm works *with* you, helping you to sleep at the times you want to sleep.

Avoid caffeine

This drug is found in coffee, tea, cocoa, cola drinks, as well as some over the counter medications. Consuming caffeine before bedtime, or drinking too much caffeine during the day will increase feelings of energy and wakefulness and make it more difficult for you to fall asleep. Any caffeine consumed after about 4 pm will still have an effect by the time you go to bed.

The table below shows the average quantity of caffeine in a variety of common drinks.

Caffeine content of common drinks per 150ml cup	
(One mug = 200–300ml)	
Roasted and ground coffee (percolated)	83 mg
Instant coffee	59 mg
Decaffeinated coffee	3 mg
Tea	27 mg
Cola drinks	15 mg
Milk chocolate (60ml)	40 mg
Cocoa (African)	6 mg
Cocoa (South American)	42 mg

Sometimes individuals get into a pattern of drinking too much caffeine during the day, sleeping badly at night time, and then consuming even larger quantities of caffeine the following day to help ward off sleepiness. Such behaviour sets up a vicious cycle, which is to be avoided wherever possible. Some helpful suggestions about caffeine are provided below:

- limit caffeine intake
- avoid drinking caffeine after about 4pm
- avoid using caffeine as a means of staying awake.

Avoid nicotine

Nicotine stimulates the nervous system by releasing a hormone called 'adrenaline'. Adrenaline acts to arouse the body and mind, making you alert and ready for action. Your body normally releases small doses of adrenaline throughout the day and large doses when you are faced with something challenging or threatening. Therefore, smoking prior to bedtime causes adrenaline to be released, thereby increasing energy and liveliness at the very time when you want to be relaxed and ready for sleep. If you are a smoker and you normally have trouble getting to sleep at night, it is best that you do not smoke for at least an hour before going to bed (preferably an hour and a half), since this is the length of time it takes for the stimulating effects of nicotine to wear off. Furthermore, if you wake up during the night and cannot go back to sleep, try not to smoke because the nicotine will make the sleeplessness worse.

Avoid excessive alcohol

A popular belief about alcohol is that alcohol will help you sleep if you are uptight and anxious. One or two glasses of wine or beer in the evening may help you to relax, but regularly having several drinks in the evening causes you to get much poorer sleep overall. As the alcohol in your system is broken down by your body, you tend to awaken more frequently and you spend less time in the deeper stages of sleep. If you drink regularly, you may find that you come to depend on the alcohol to reduce your anxiety and help you get to sleep. Not only will alcohol leave you feeling unrefreshed the next morning (because you are robbed of better quality sleep), but you are likely to have rebound anxiety which will last throughout the day and make it even more difficult to sleep at night. Alcohol is not the solution to sleeping problems so do not drink before you go to bed.

Avoid sleeping pills

The use of sleeping pills (sedative hypnotics) for any length of time causes as many problems as it solves. While sedative hypnotics will help you fall asleep and will decrease your anxiety *in the short term*, these benefits will disappear in the long term if you continue to use the sedatives regularly. That is, you will begin to feel anxious and sleepless even though you are taking the pills. When this happens you will be tempted to take more sleeping pills since doing so will bring back the benefits of the drug. Unfortunately, however, these benefits will not be permanent either so that after a time you again experience the unwanted symptoms of anxiety and sleeplessness. The process that makes you less sensitive to the benefits of the drug over time is called *tolerance*. While sleeping pills are useful for overcoming temporary sleep loss, the

development of tolerance means that these drugs do not provide a long-term solution to sleeping problems.

Continual use of sleeping pills also has the disadvantage that you will find it extremely difficult to give up the drugs because doing so will cause you to experience withdrawal effects. The levels of anxiety and sleeplessness that you experience after stopping the drug are likely to be greater than the anxiety and sleeplessness that made you *start* using the drug. Coming off sleeping pills can also cause you to have vivid dreams and nightmares. These dreams are often highly emotional and disturbing.

If you do not use sleeping pills, or use them only occasionally, take heed of these warnings and do not start using them regularly. If you do use sleeping pills every night to help you sleep, it is recommended that you talk to your family doctor about reducing your intake of sleeping pills over time until you can stop using the pills altogether. Your doctor can help you come off the sleeping pills slowly without causing too many unpleasant side effects. Do not stop taking your sleeping pills without first talking to your doctor.

Take a late snack

A light bedtime snack, such as a warm glass of milk or a banana, will help some people get to sleep. These foods are high in an amino acid called tryptophan, which is thought to be involved in the biochemical systems that induce and maintain sleep. If nothing else, the snack will prevent you from getting hungry during the night.

Don't exercise before going to bed

Avoid exercise in the three hours before you go to bed, otherwise you may still be too aroused following the exercise to be able to fall asleep.

Coping with crying babies

Young babies need frequent feeding and nappy-changing, therefore they tend to wake up often during the night. Moreover, a baby's sleep cycle is much shorter than an adult's sleep cycle. A baby usually has a 50-minute sleep cycle and tends to have about two to four cycles per sleep period. Therefore, babies tend to awaken much more frequently than adults who have a 90 minute sleep cycle and experience about 5 to 6 cycles per sleep period.

If you have a young baby to look after, there are a number of things that may help to reduce the extent of the baby's crying. When a baby cries during the night, he/she usually wants food, or to be comforted. Trying to discipline a young baby by yelling at or ignoring a baby does not usually work. Many parents find it better to give the baby plenty of cuddles and kisses so that the baby quiets down and goes back to sleep feeling safe and secure. Moreover, it may help if you alter the baby's feeding time so that the baby is fed immediately before you go to bed rather than, say, two hours later. This way, you may not have to get up as often during the night. These suggestions do not always work, but take heart — babies do grow up and one day they will actually sleep undisturbed all night long!

Summary of good sleep habits

1. Go to bed when you are sleepy and get up at the same time every morning. Do not sleep late in the mornings trying to make up for 'lost sleep' and, if you think you have insomnia, do not take naps during the day.

2. Set aside time for problem solving during the day, not last thing at night. Identify any problems that are causing you to be anxious and try to resolve these problems by making decisions.
3. Do not lie in bed worrying for long periods of time. If you cannot sleep, get out of bed and do something that is distracting yet relaxing, such as knitting or listening to music. (It will be important to plan appropriate activities in advance.) Return to bed only when you feel sleepy again.
4. Do not use alcohol to help you sleep.
5. If you experience insomnia, avoid drinking caffeinated drinks after about 4 pm and do not drink more than two cups of caffeinated drinks each day.
6. Do not smoke for at least an hour (preferably an hour and a half) before going to bed.
7. Avoid sleeping pills: they do not provide a long-term solution to sleeping problems.
8. If you sleep in a noisy place, try to reduce noise levels by closing windows and doors and wearing ear-plugs.
9. Ensure the room is dark and that the morning light does not filter in. If you have a tendency to oversleep, it may be helpful to let the morning light enter the bedroom.
10. Getting to sleep when you are comfortable is much easier than getting to sleep when you are hungry, cold, in some kind of physical pain, or when you need to go to the toilet. Make sure all your immediate needs have been met before you go to bed.
11. Regular exercise during the day or early evening can improve sleeping patterns. Try to avoid exercise late in the evening as this may make it more difficult for you to get to sleep (with the exception of sex, which may *help* you to sleep).
12. By doing the same thing every night before you go to bed you can improve your chances of falling asleep quickly. It is a good idea to develop a short routine involving things like washing your face and cleaning your teeth, which you can easily perform before going to bed at night. A hot bath for 20 minutes may also be helpful.
13. Be aware of things in the environment that may interfere with your sleep. For example, pets can disturb your sleep if they become active during the night or if they prevent you from moving freely in the bed. Moreover, digital clocks can be distracting if they glow or flash. It is often helpful to face the clock in the opposite direction.

ⁱ The leaflet has been adapted with permission from World Health Organization. *Mental Disorders in Primary Care: A WHO Educational Package*, 1998, and Andrews G, Jenkins R. *Management of Mental Disorders (UK Edition)*. Sydney: World Health Organization Collaborating Centre for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, 1999. Distributed for the publishers in the UK by IN 2 Mail Ltd, Fax: +44 (0) 1252 322315; PO Box 55, Aldershot, Hampshire GU12 4FP.