

Tips for Better Sleep

Good sleep habits apply to everyone. While the belief that older adults need less sleep is now considered a myth, sleep quality does diminish with age. People over 65 have more light sleep and experience more sleep disruptions, so good sleep habits are even more important as we age.

- Exercise during the day
- Meditate or have slow-down times during the day
- Make sure the temperature is just right; not too hot or too cold
- Keep bed for sleep and intimacy
- If you wake wired – get out of bed, have a gentle stretch and practise some breathing exercises
- Daytime naps are OK but keep them short – 15-20 minutes
- Avoid putting too much pressure on yourself around your sleep
- Set boundaries and look forward to going to bed – a place to let go and allow sleep to happen



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Sleep Health in adults & older people



HOW MUCH SLEEP IS ENOUGH SLEEP?

While the amount of sleep we need varies from person to person and changes throughout our lives, most adults need 7-9 hours' sleep each night. Those over 65 generally need a little less (7-8 hours), spend more time in the lighter stages of sleep and less time in deeper sleep. Most of our deep sleep occurs in the first three hours.

Poor sleep can affect mood, memory, cognitive function, weight and metabolism. If you're waking unrefreshed, having trouble focusing, feeling drowsy during the day or relying on sugar or caffeine to stay awake, you may need to see a healthcare professional about your sleep.

ESTABLISH A SLEEP ROUTINE

Our sleep-wake cycle is controlled by an internal clock and hormones including the sleep-promoting hormone melatonin. It functions best with a regular sleep routine.

A regular getting up time anchors your sleep. It should be the same no matter what the quality of the previous nights' sleep. When having a bad patch of sleep, sleeping in tends to exacerbate the problem.

When you feel sleepy at bedtime, use it as a window of opportunity for sleep. Falling asleep on the couch during the evening reduces your sleep drive and makes it harder to fall asleep when you go to bed. Going to bed early can also disturb your sleep.

Develop a bedtime routine. Allow yourself to wind down in the hour before going to bed – to let go of the day and look forward to having the “time-out time of sleeping”. You may like to take a warm bath, listen to music, read, have a warm milk drink or herbal tea.

GOOD SLEEP HYGIENE

The term “sleep hygiene” refers to healthy habits, behaviours and environmental factors that can be adjusted to improve sleep. It is important to explore

factors such as activity, stimulants, temperature, light, location, comfort levels, eating and drinking.

Caffeine – in colas, soft drinks, coffee and tea – too much or too close to bedtime keeps you “wired”. Caffeinated drinks are better earlier in the day.

Smoking late at night will impact on sleep onset and return to sleep – consider stopping or reducing.

Alcohol may help sleep onset but negatively impacts overall sleep quality. Unfortunately, it will exacerbate snoring and will make obstructive sleep apnea worse.

Your body slows down at night. Eating a large meal too close to bedtime (2-3 hours before) impacts on sleep onset and your glucose metabolism.

Make your bed, mattress, pillows and doona restful and comfortable. Getting the temperature right is important. Being too hot can impact on sleep as we need a falling body temperature to go to sleep and stay asleep.

Train your brain to link bed with sleep – not to being unhappy and not sleeping.

Use your bedroom for sleep and intimacy – it needs to be a place that is different from the rest of the house and away from work-related activities.

Stimulating activities such as computer games and social media are not a good idea immediately before bed. Brightly-lit environments and the blue light from computers/phones can reduce the onset of your sleep hormone melatonin.

Exercise throughout the day is good for sleep quality – it releases endorphins (healthy mood hormones) and aids sleep onset. Exercising in the morning gets you up and may give you morning light to suppress your sleep hormone melatonin. Intense exercise at night will make you hot and wire you whereas stretching or yoga at night can be very useful.

CAN'T SLEEP, WON'T SLEEP, WHAT SHALL I DO?

Matching time in bed with perceived sleep time generally means you are not lying in bed waiting for sleep or worrying about why you are not asleep. We need to be “sleepy tired” to be able to go to sleep and if too much time is spent in bed awake this doesn't happen.

Sleep is not something you can force. If you are not asleep within 20-30 minutes of getting into bed and you are feeling wired, consider getting up, going to another darkened room and sitting quietly. Boredom can promote sleep.

Avoid watching television, using your computer or doing household chores. Eating in the middle of the night is a reward and you may inadvertently train yourself to wake and then eat! Sometimes telling yourself to stay awake in the dark can be very useful as you may then feel more tired. Return to bed after about 10 minutes and see what happens. You may need to repeat this technique a few times.

MY BRAIN WON'T SWITCH OFF

If you lie awake at night and cannot switch off your thoughts, set aside a “worry time” during the evening to think about the day's events, make plans and formulate possible solutions. Then practice “letting go” as you generally cannot do anything with it in the middle of the night except keep yourself awake! Develop a bedtime routine you look forward to which prepares your body and mind for sleep.

YOUR DOCTOR AND MEDICATION

If you are struggling with your sleep, seek advice from your GP who may refer you to a sleep specialist or psychologist. There are medications that can help with sleep onset. It is best to take them only when advised by your doctor or pharmacist. Sleeping pills can help when a specific event in your life is making it hard to sleep but they are only a short-term fix.

To find out more, go to www.woolcock.org.au/clinic.