

Sleep and Insomnia



A good night's sleep is something that most of us take for granted. We go to bed, drift off to sleep and wake up with the alarm clock the next morning feeling refreshed and ready to face the day's challenges.

Most of us do not give a second thought about how a lack of sleep would impact our performance at work, our relationships or our behaviour at home.

For those who suffer from a poor sleep pattern, each day can present many challenges which those who enjoyed a full night's sleep may not recognise. Any number of different factors can cause temporary or longer-lasting sleep problems. More than 30% of the population suffers from some form of sleep disorder.

This helpsheet will help you consider aspects of sleep problems to identify why you may be experiencing them, and what you can do to make changes to overcome them.

If you'd like to discuss any of the issues raised in this Helpsheet, the CiC 24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline is available for practical and emotional support.

Sleep and Insomnia



What is sleep and why do we need it?

Sleep occurs naturally for most people. Our bodies relax and become inactive and our consciousness reduces or becomes absent. No-one is really sure why we sleep. The amount of energy saved when we are asleep is miniscule. Some scientists believe that we need sleep to process the day's events and to dream. Fatigue caused by lack of sleep can lead to higher blood pressure and to higher levels of cortisol being produced, which can in turn suppress the immune system. What's certain though, is that our brain development and functioning is affected by loss of sleep. Just try staying awake for a long period and see what happens to your memory, your speech and your decision making!

Not surprisingly, there is more and more evidence suggesting a link between sleep problems and poor mental health. In January this year, the UK charity the Mental Health Foundation published the largest ever survey into the nation's sleep – contacting more than five thousand people.

The survey produced some interesting findings. Compared to people who sleep well, people with insomnia are –

- ▶ four times as likely to have relationship problems
- ▶ three times as likely to experience low mood and lack concentration during the day.
- ▶ are twice as likely to suffer from energy deficiency
- ▶ three times as likely to struggle to get things done at work or elsewhere

The survey found that more than 30% of the population suffers from insomnia or another form of sleep disorder.

Dr. Dan Robotham, who is Senior Researcher at the Mental Health Foundation, said;

“Poor sleep can lead to mental health problems, and mental health problems can lead to poor sleep. As a result, those who start experiencing insomnia can soon find themselves in a downward spiral of sleeplessness and ill-health, from which some never fully recover. It is therefore crucial that people are aware of the effective ways of breaking that spiral by improving the quality of their sleep. Employers, schools

and public health bodies also need to know how they can identify and support people suffering from sleep disorders.”

Does any of this sound familiar to you? Of course, we may all experience sleep difficulties from time to time, but if your sleep is being affected over a long period, help is available. Sleep disorders can lead to staff absences and to reduced productivity and can have an impact on the emotional wellbeing of employees.

This is where the CiC 24-Confidential Care Adviceline can help. We provide practical and emotional support if you'd like to discuss any of the issues raised in this Helpsheet, or if you are being troubled by issues which are affecting your sleep.

How much sleep do we need?

What is a normal amount of sleep? Of course there is no easy answer to this question. It is a popular misconception that we all need 7 to 8 hours of sleep per night. Studies show that some people function well on as little as 4 hours sleep per night, and others need as much as 10. The former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher famously claimed to manage on only five hours of sleep every night!

The amount of sleep a person needs can also vary throughout his or her life. Newborn babies can sleep as much as 18 hours per day, whereas a person in their seventies might need only 5 or 6 hours. And good sleep doesn't just mean lots of sleep. The amount of sleep each of us needs varies.

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What causes sleep problems?

There are numerous reasons why our sleep can be affected. There are of course the normal effects of ageing where the amount we need to sleep changes. There may be medical reasons for disrupted sleep such as an increased need to go to the toilet or developing arthritis. We may be affected by loss or bereavement and some medicines can interfere with sleep. Sleep is also affected by how we are feeling. If we are suffering from stress or worrying about something in particular, it can have an impact on our sleep.

Feeling depressed or experiencing low mood can disrupt our sleep. We may find ourselves waking up earlier or finding it difficult to get off to sleep when we are depressed.

People who work shifts often have difficulty sleeping. Remember there are other Helpsheets available dealing with some of the issues mentioned above, such as depression or stress. Your GP is also available to talk to about any sleep concerns you may have.

What can I do about my sleep problem?

It's surprising, but just making a few small changes can have a big impact on how we sleep.

Environment

How long is it since you changed your mattress? Is your room dark enough? Is it too hot or too cold? Are you kept awake by someone sleeping in the same room? Is there anything you can do to reduce disturbance and external noise? Try to avoid watching TV in bed and do something to help you relax before sleeping, such as playing soothing music.

Lifestyle

Regular exercise and eating healthily can play a big part in how we sleep. Avoid caffeine at least four hours before going to bed and try not to drink alcohol before trying to sleep. It may help us fall asleep but disturbs our deep sleep. Smoking is also a stimulant. Getting into a regular routine can also help your body to know where it is. Try not to go to bed until you feel sleepy.

Attitude

Try not to worry too much about sleep as this may affect you in a negative way. If problems are keeping you awake, get out of bed and write down possible solutions to them.

See overleaf for our top ten tips on beating sleep problems!

Top Ten Tips

- 1 Having a bath before going to sleep can help to lower the body temperature which may facilitate deeper sleep. Although the bath will initially raise your body temperature, it will eventually fall to a level more conducive to better sleep.
- 2 Certain foods such as bananas and lettuce are claimed to have natural qualities that help to induce sleep.
- 3 Visualise yourself in a deep relaxing sleep and try to focus on this image when you are in bed.
- 4 Breathing exercises can help. Find out more by contacting a local yoga or meditation group.
- 5 Speak to your pharmacist about herbal remedies such as valerian or skull cap.
- 6 Working through the body, tense and relax your muscles a few times when you are lying in bed. Start with the muscles in the feet, then the calves etc until you have worked through all parts of your body.
- 7 Protein acts as a stimulant and carbohydrate as a relaxant. Try to avoid eating protein late at night.
- 8 Listen to some relaxing music before going to sleep. There is a free relaxation download available from the How Did You Sleep website detailed below.
- 9 For severe insomnia, choose a six hour time period within a 24 hour day e.g. midnight to 6am, 2am to 8am etc. Only attempt to sleep during the time you have selected. Eventually you will fall into a regular sleep pattern.
- 10 Ask a partner or friend to massage you before going to sleep.

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Additional Resources

Mindfulness: A practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world

by Mark Williams and Danny Penman

NHS Wellbeing Relaxation CD

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