

How to sleep well: A guide for adults

How to sleep well

When it comes to looking after our health, most of us are aware of the importance of having a balanced diet and getting regular exercise. But sleeping well is also a must if you want to look, feel and perform at your best – as anyone who's ever had a bad night's sleep will probably already know.

The amount of sleep we need every night is a subject that's much debated, with eight hours often cited as the gold standard for sleep time. But the truth is how much sleep we need varies from person to person – according to the NHS, adults on average need between seven and nine hours a night to feel refreshed and to function well mentally and physically.

Yet one survey after another suggests we're coming up short when it comes to getting a good night's sleep, with The Sleep Council's Great British Bedtime Report discovering 30 per cent of people sleep poorly most nights. Sleep Council figures also suggest most of us sleep for seven hours or less each night, with more than a third of us getting by on just five or six hours' sleep.

If you're a poor sleeper, statistics suggest you probably haven't seen your doctor for help with getting a more restful night (The Great British Bedtime Report suggests only one in 10 people have consulted their GP about poor sleep).

However, your GP could help you get to the bottom of what's causing the problem, which means they can decide how to treat it. Doctors rarely prescribe sleeping pills these days, as they can have serious side effects and you can become dependent on them. But if they feel it's suitable your GP may recommend cognitive behavioural therapy, which is designed to help you change any behaviours that are stopping you from sleeping well.

In the meantime, this guide aims to give you information about self-help strategies you can try right now that may help you get a better night's sleep.

Did you know?

Forty-five per cent of poor sleepers say stress and worry is the main reason they don't sleep well, with 25 per cent blaming their partner's snoring or teeth grinding. (Source: *The Sleep Council Great British Bedtime Report*)

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How poor sleep can affect your wellbeing

Most of us know what it's like to have the occasional restless night, and how it can make us feel tired, irritable and unable to concentrate very well the next day. But if you have problems with sleeping on a regular basis it could be a sign that you have insomnia. These problems can include things like...

- Taking a long time to get to sleep
- Lying awake at night
- Waking up several times throughout the night
- Waking up early then not being able to get back to sleep

There are lots of things that can cause these sleep problems, including medical conditions such as an overactive thyroid, restless legs syndrome, chronic pain conditions (such as arthritis or backache), Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease or mental health issues such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Some medicines can cause insomnia too, or it could simply be down to your age, as insomnia is believed to be more common in older people.

However, if you do have insomnia it can also lead to an increased risk of some

health conditions, with high blood pressure, stroke, heart disease, diabetes and some mental health disorders including depression and anxiety all linked with a lack of sleep.

The good news is that you can usually improve your sleep by making changes to your behaviour and sleeping habits, including making your bedroom into the ideal place for sleep and relaxation.

The ideal sleeping environment

Experts are becoming increasingly aware of the importance of having a good sleep-promoting environment to help you relax and drift off more easily. Here are some of the things you can apply to your bedroom that could help reduce restless nights:

Temperature - Bedrooms that are too hot, cold or draughty aren't the best places for getting a good night's sleep. A bedroom that's too hot can make you feel restless, whereas being too cold can make it harder for you to fall asleep. The right sort of temperature is around 16 - 18C/60 - 65F, though you may need to make the room a little warmer if a child or an older person is sleeping there. Extra blankets and a hot water bottle can help too, if you're feeling chilly.

Lighting - The darker your bedroom, the easier you'll fall asleep because darkness helps your body produce a relaxing hormone called melatonin. This may explain why many people find it easier to get a good night's sleep during the winter

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months as, despite the colder temperatures, those extra hours of darkness can make a big difference.

If your bedroom is too light because you have bright street lights outside, try wearing a sleep mask that blocks out the light when you go to bed, or invest in some thick curtains or black-out blinds. Most importantly, keep digital technology and devices with LED displays out of the bedroom – including TVs, laptops, alarm clocks and mobile phones – as the type of light they emit can suppress your body's melatonin production and make you sleep less soundly.

Noise - Few people find it easy to get to sleep – or stay asleep – in a noisy environment. The type of sound that can delay or disrupt your sleep is sudden, loud and repetitive, and while you can have a good degree of control over the sounds coming from your own home, unless you have double glazing you may be kept awake by sounds coming from outside. If that's the case, try using ear plugs, especially during the summer when you may want to keep your bedroom window open.

On the other hand, some people find certain soft and steady sounds can actually help them sleep. During hot weather, for instance, you may find that the sound of an electric fan quite soothing, and that it helps you to drift off more easily than usual. If so, consider investing in a sound therapy machine that plays sounds such as rain, ocean waves and white

noise to help you sleep more soundly all year round.

Comfort - If you've ever tried sleeping on an old, lumpy bed, you'll know how difficult it can be to drift off when you feel uncomfortable. Sleeping on an unsupportive mattress can also force you into a poor sleep posture, which can rob you of some sleep as well as leave you with aches and pains in the morning. So make sure your mattress and pillows give you the right support and comfort, and that your bedding is fresh and well aired.

According to the Sleep Council you should consider changing your bed after seven years. Find out more about what you should look for in a new bed and mattress by reading the [*National Bed Federation Bed Buyers' Guide*](#).

Colours - Certain colours – such as red and purple – can be stimulating rather than calming, which means it's unlikely they'll put you in the mood for sleep if you're surrounded by them last thing at night. So when you next decorate your bedroom, try to choose soft, soothing tones: subtle shades of blue and green are thought to be among the most effective in promoting good-quality sleep.

Getting into sleep-friendly habits

Going to bed and getting up at the same time every day is thought to be important for getting a good night's sleep. Pick the time of night when you usually feel tired as your regular bedtime, and try not to stay

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up much later than this at weekends or during holidays, or any other time when you don't have to get up early the next day.

Aim to wake up at the same time every day too – if you can, try to wake up naturally without an alarm (and avoid the temptation of having a lie-in, even when you can). If you have to rely on an alarm to wake you up it could mean that you're not getting enough sleep, in which case you may want to try going to bed a little earlier.

Having a regular bedtime routine will help programme your brain and your internal body clock, so you'll automatically be ready for sleep when your regular time comes along.

Meanwhile there are several other habits you can try to develop that will give you a better chance of sleeping well:

Wind down before bedtime - Being wound up or excited before bed can stop you from falling asleep. So it's important to have some time to prepare yourself mentally and physically for sleep – try whatever helps you feel more relaxed, such as taking a warm bath, listening to a relaxation CD, reading a book that helps you feel calm or meditating and concentrating on your breathing before you turn in.

Some light exercise such as a few gentle stretches may also be helpful, but avoid

anything more strenuous in the evening, as even moderate-intensity physical activity is stimulating, and could make you feel more awake rather than sleepy (NHS experts recommend not exercising at least four hours before bed if you want to sleep well).

Also try to avoid watching TV or using your laptop or mobile phone before going to bed.

Avoid caffeine - If you have trouble getting to sleep most nights, caffeine could be the culprit. So try to avoid drinks such as tea, coffee and caffeinated soft drinks – even hot chocolate, as chocolate contains caffeine – before bed. According to the NHS you should avoid having caffeine at least six hours before bedtime.

If you like to have a warm drink before bedtime, try a herbal tea designed to help you feel calm and relaxed. Or have a mug of plain, warm milk, as milk contains a chemical that can help you feel sleepy.

Eat early - Try not to have a big meal too late in the evening, as eating a lot means your digestive system has to work hard. This can disturb your sleep because an overactive digestive system increases your metabolism and body temperature. Allow at least two to three hours between eating and going to bed, so that your food can be digested before you turn in. Also try to avoid eating anything at night that causes problems such as indigestion and heartburn, such as spicy or acidic foods.

However, try not to go to bed on a completely empty stomach either. Having a light snack

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before bed could help you sleep better – try eating a small bowl of cereal with milk, a small pot of yoghurt, a banana or a couple of crackers with a small piece of cheese or half a teaspoon of peanut butter to make sure you don't wake up feeling hungry.

Drink less - If you drink a lot of liquid before bedtime, it's highly likely your bladder will wake you up again after you've fallen asleep. So try to cut down on how much you drink late in the evening, including alcohol. Even though you may think alcohol helps make you feel drowsy, it can disrupt your sleep later in the night. Having alcohol before going to bed can also lead to snoring and disrupted breathing, neither of which will help you feel refreshed the next day.

Smoking can also lead to poor sleep, because nicotine is a stimulant. If you need help with giving up smoking, speak to your GP or pharmacist.

Tackle stress - Stress and anxiety are among the top things that prevent many people from sleeping well. Experts believe this is because they can increase your heart rate, which makes your brain more alert and active. You may also feel anxious about not getting enough sleep, which won't make it any easier for you to sleep well.

There are lots of things you can do that could help manage your stress and anxiety levels. Establishing a relaxing bedtime wind-down routine every night is a good place to start. If you still feel too anxious to sleep, try some of the anti-stress techniques recommended by the mental health charity [Mind](#) or read what the

[Mental Health Foundation](#) has to say about stress management.

Sleep problems: snoring and teeth grinding

There are several things that can disrupt not just your sleep but your partner's sleep too. According to the Sleep Council Great British Bedtime Report, partner disturbance is the UK's second most common cause of disturbed sleep, and snoring could be to blame.

Snoring can be caused by nasal or sinus problems, being overweight, taking certain medicines and also your sleep posture – sleeping on your side, for instance, is generally better than sleeping on your back for preventing snoring. Losing weight can also help if you've started snoring after putting weight on. Meanwhile alcohol can affect the tone of the muscles in the back of your throat, which can make snoring more likely. Even your pillows could be making you snore, especially if you have allergies (changing your pillows may help if this is the case).

Besides changing your sleep position, losing weight and avoiding alcohol, giving up smoking may also help reduce snoring. You could also try products such as anti-snoring oral or nasal strips, or a mouth guard that helps keep your airways open. These are available at most high-street pharmacies.

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However, if your partner has mentioned that you make gasping or choking noises while you're asleep, you may have a condition called sleep apnoea. This happens when your upper airways collapse during sleep, making your breathing irregular and causing daytime sleepiness. If you think you may have sleep apnoea, see your GP for advice, as it can have a significant effect on your quality of life (as well as that of your partner).

Teeth grinding - Called bruxism in the medical world, teeth grinding can also have a major impact on you and your partner's sleep. It's a common problem, says The Bruxism Association, which claims it affects up to 10 per cent of the UK population. There are two types of bruxism – one happens when you grind your teeth and clench your jaw while you're awake, and the other while you're asleep. Called sleep bruxism, this is thought to be the most common type, and is classed as a sleep-related movement disorder.

You may not realise you're grinding your teeth in your sleep, but your partner may have complained that your grinding has kept them awake. If you sleep on your own you may not know you have sleep bruxism until you have a related problem such as worn, damaged or sensitive teeth, headaches, migraines, jaw stiffness, facial or ear pain. If you think you're experiencing any of these symptoms, your dentist is the best person to consult for advice.

Ironically, sleeping more soundly may make you grind your teeth less, since it's thought that people grind their teeth mostly during the lighter stages of sleep. So if you have sleep bruxism, making the lifestyle changes outlined above may be particularly helpful.

Useful links

If you are experiencing any of the issues covered in this guide, in the first instance call our free helpline on 0808 801 0550. Our Advisors will listen without judging and will work with you as best they can to achieve a positive outcome. If you prefer you can email: support@ltcharity.org.uk Visit our website: www.licensedtradecharity.org.uk. It's full of useful information about the kind of issues we know people who work in the licensed trade face.

Other sources of information:

British Snoring & Sleep Apnoea Association
www.britishsnoring.co.uk
For advice on what you can do about snoring and sleep apnoea.

The Sleep Council
www.sleepcouncil.org.uk
Lots of information on getting a better night's sleep, including a free [30 Day Better Sleep Plan](#).

Mental Health Foundation
www.mentalhealth.org.uk
Find tips on managing stress and other mental health issues that may be affecting your sleep quality, including the charity's guide [How to sleep better](#).

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The Bruxism Association

www.bruxism.org.uk

More details about teeth grinding and clenching, including what causes it and what you can do to help yourself.

NOTE: This guide is not exhaustive. It has been produced by the Licensed Trade Charity to provide you with an overview of the issue in question. If you're experiencing problems with this issue, our Advisors are available to you.