

Getting back into the rhythm of sleep

Sleep advice for people
with insomnia

Foreword by Dr Alan Wade

Sleeping is often taken for granted, but when it is hard to come by it can place a burden on life. Sleep is necessary to maintain a healthy and balanced life. Poor sleep may have a knock-on effect on other parts of daily life, such as work, home and social life.

It is important to get back into a normal rhythm of sleep in the most natural way possible. This leaflet contains advice on practical everyday tips to help achieve restful and refreshing sleep. It also provides information about sleep and insomnia, so you can understand your sleeping problems better.

Understanding how sleep is an essential function that allows us to get on with day-to-day life is the first step in helping to overcome insomnia.

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About this leaflet

This leaflet is for adults with insomnia. It offers tips on how to sleep better and gives details on what normal sleep is and what insomnia is. Alongside this leaflet there is a *Sleep Diary* for you to write about how much you sleep at night, the quality of sleep you get, and how you feel during the day.

This leaflet and the sleep diary is available to download from www.sleepadvice.co.uk/public

Why is sleep important?

A good night's sleep is restorative and helps you function well in the day. Sleep allows your body and mind to be rested, reorganised and rejuvenated, so you are refreshed and ready for the next day. Studies show that how well you sleep in the night is directly linked to how productive you are the next day.¹⁻³ Sleep is necessary for your body and mind to feel refreshed and therefore to function well the next day.

How does sleep happen?

Humans have an internal 24-hour biological clock called the circadian rhythm, which helps to tell us when to go to sleep, and when to wake. The circadian rhythm acts as the body's natural time keeping system and is triggered by light. Your body clock is synchronised to the dark-light cycle where you live.⁴

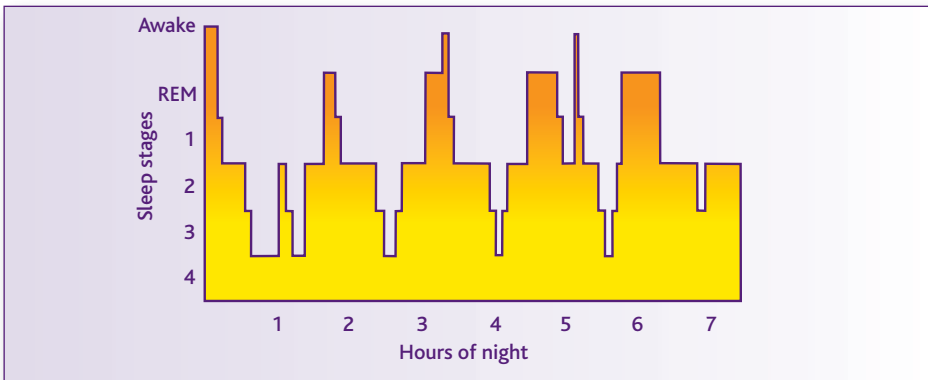
What happens when you sleep?

Normal sleep is made up of five different stages that form the sleep cycle. During a night's sleep you will go through the *sleep cycle* several times. There are also several short periods of waking for one to two minutes, but normally you aren't aware of them. Noise disturbances or feeling worried during these periods of waking can make you remember them or increase their length.⁵ Stages 1 to 4 are part of non-rapid eye movement (NREM) sleep, and Stage 5 is called rapid eye movement (REM) sleep.

The stages of sleep:^{5,6}

- **Stage 1:** light sleep when you're half awake and half asleep. This is the change from wakefulness to sleep.
- **Stage 2:** the onset of sleep, when you become disengaged from surroundings.
- **Stage 3:** deep sleep, which is the first refreshing phase of sleep.
- **Stage 4:** more deep sleep from which it is difficult to wake. During this stage your body repairs itself and your energy is restored.
- **Stage 5:** this is REM sleep and usually begins about 90 minutes after you fall asleep. As the night progresses, each duration of REM sleep gets longer. Most dreams happen during REM sleep. REM sleep is essential for keeping alert in the day.

The sleep cycle hypnogram of an adult without insomnia⁷



How much sleep is needed?

For some adults, only three hours a night may be enough, but most adults will need about seven to eight hours a night to feel refreshed the next day.⁵ Generally, with age it is normal to sleep less, and many elderly people will sleep for less than six hours a night. These differences in sleep happen because the sleep cycle alters naturally with age.⁷

As you get older you are more likely to feel sleepier earlier in the evening compared to when you were in your 20s and 30s, and you may wake earlier in the morning. You are also much more likely to experience interrupted sleep during the night as you get older.⁷

It is important to remember that it is the **quality of sleep**, not just the length of sleep, which is important for a good night's sleep.³ You need to go through the full sleep cycle several times a night, and spend enough time in the deep sleep stages to get the refreshing quality sleep that leaves you feeling wakeful the next day.⁷

What is insomnia?

Sometimes you may sleep poorly for a few nights if you are worried or excited, and this can be quite normal.⁵ However if the poor sleep goes on for **more than one month** that is called *insomnia*. In insomnia some or most of the following symptoms are present:^{8,9}

- Not being able to get off to sleep
- Waking up for long periods throughout the night
- Waking up too early
- Not feeling refreshed after a night's sleep.

Insomnia leaves people feeling un-refreshed after a night's sleep. If you have insomnia, it can therefore have an impact on how you feel and function in the daytime in the following ways:^{5,8,9}

- You are tired all the time
- You nod off during the day
- You find it difficult to concentrate on tasks or work productively
- You feel too tired to enjoy social or leisure activities
- You find it hard to make decisions
- You may become forgetful
- You start to feel irritable and moody.

Types of insomnia

Insomnia can be divided into two types – primary and secondary. **Primary insomnia** is insomnia that is not caused by a physical or mental illness, or because of a side effect of medication or substances (such as alcohol or street drugs).⁹ If the inability to sleep is caused by ill health or as a result of medication or substances, then this is called **secondary insomnia**.^{9,10}

For example, secondary insomnia can happen when there is pain from a condition such as arthritis.¹¹ Anxiety or depression can also lead to secondary insomnia.¹¹ To resolve secondary insomnia, it is important to get the underlying problem treated first by your doctor.⁵

How does insomnia affect daily life?

If you are suffering from insomnia, or know someone who does, you will probably know that it has a big impact on day-to-day life. Insomnia can make it hard to concentrate at work, enjoy social activities and spend quality time with friends and partners.^{5,9,12} You may find that your insomnia has become a part of who you are and that being exhausted is just a normal part of life.

What can you do to sleep better?

Some simple steps can help you sleep better. Your doctor may have already given you some advice on what to do.

Keep good sleeping habits...

- **Don't sleep late** even if you've had a bad night, or use the weekends to catch up on sleep as this can upset your body clock.^{5, 13}
- **Get up** at the same time each day to reinforce your body clock no matter how you feel; this will help your sleep patterns.¹³
- **Avoid daytime naps** if your goal is to sleep more during the night, but napping can help with short-term alertness if you keep your naps to no more than 20 to 30 minutes.¹⁴
- **Go to bed when sleepy** and not before.¹⁵
- If you are awake in bed for more than 20 minutes **get up**, leave the bedroom and do something you find relaxing until you feel tired enough to go back to bed.¹⁵

Make your bedroom right for sleep...

- Make sure your bedroom is **not too hot, cold or noisy**.⁵ Try wearing earplugs to block out any external noise, or snoring from your partner and an eye mask to shut out light.¹³
- Try to **only use the bedroom for sleep**.¹³ Avoid watching TV or working in your bedroom.^{13, 15}
- **Ensure your bed is comfortable** and big enough for you and your sleep partner. Your mattress should support you well. Generally, mattresses should be replaced every ten years or so.^{5, 14}
- **Hide the alarm clock**. Do not clock-watch as this does not help with getting to sleep.¹³

Get in the mood for sleep...

- **Relax and wind down** before bedtime.¹⁵ Enjoy relaxing activities like a bath or play soft music for a few minutes at bedtime.¹⁴
- **Do not do anything mentally or physically** demanding, such as studying or difficult reading within 90 minutes of bedtime.¹⁵
- **Put the day to rest**. Don't worry about the day's events or tomorrow and don't worry about the chance you won't sleep – remember people cope even after a sleepless night.¹⁵

Things to avoid...

- **Caffeine** for six hours before bedtime. This includes tea, coffee, caffeinated soft drinks and any food containing caffeine.^{5, 8, 13}
- **Smoking** before bedtime. Nicotine in cigarettes is a stimulant like caffeine, which can keep you awake, so try to avoid smoking close to bedtime.^{5, 8, 13}
- **Alcohol** in large quantities or using it to help you drop off. Alcohol may get you to sleep but it disrupts sleep later in the night and causes early morning waking.^{5, 8, 13}
- **A heavy meal** just before bedtime. Try eating earlier in the evening or keeping to a light meal.^{5, 8, 13}
- **Exercising** late in the evening. Regular exercise in the day or early evening, such as a brisk walk or run will actually help sleep, but not if you do it too close to bedtime.^{5, 8, 14}

These tips are a good way to manage sleep problems naturally and you may not need any other help. Remember that even small gains are progress. But if after trying all these measures you still can't get a good night's rest you should go to your GP and ask for further advice.

Sleep diaries

Keeping a personal diary of how you have slept in the night is a useful way for you to record your sleeping patterns and quality of sleep over a period of time. It will help you identify if there is anything you are doing which compromises your sleep.¹³ You can also share your sleep diary with your doctor, should you decide to get further advice, so you can both talk about your sleeping problem and decide how best to manage it.

Your personal sleep diary

Along with this leaflet there is a sleep diary for you to fill in for up to 28 days. You will be able to record how you slept in the night, and how alert and refreshed you felt in the daytime. Also record what you drank, ate and how much exercise you did. It is a good idea to use this diary along with the tips given in this leaflet so you can then compare diary entries throughout the days to see how your sleep improves.

Remember that...

- It is perfectly normal to have a few days of poor sleep, especially when you are excited or worried, but poor sleep for more than a month can be insomnia.
- Different people need different amounts of sleep.
- As you get older it is normal for sleeping patterns to change.
- Getting good quality sleep and spending enough time in deep sleep is important to feel refreshed and alert the next day.
- Taking simple steps in making changes to your routine, habits and bedroom environment can help you sleep better.
- If you still find you are having a problem with getting good sleep, visit your GP who may be able to give you further advice.

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