

Having a good night's sleep is vital for maintaining good overall health. The sleeping brain is very active, restoring body and brain cells essential for detoxing, learning, memory, concentration, problem solving and creativity.

Although individuals vary normally in their need for, and their satisfaction with, sleep, it is estimated we need 8-9 hours per night. On average, most adults are getting 7.5 hours or less and one in five experience insomnia and suffer the consequences of sleep deprivation.

Inadequate or poor quality sleep lately could mean you have been:

- Having difficulty falling asleep,
- Waking up frequently during the night with difficulty returning to sleep,
- Waking up too early in the morning, and/or
- Experiencing unrefreshing sleep.

Consequences of Sleep Deprivation

The consequences of not getting enough sleep can have a range of short-term and longer-term problems. Sleep deprivation translates into physical, mental, relational and occupational health risks.

Short Term:

- Daytime tiredness
- Poor concentration
- Alertness
- Reactivity
- Energy
- Irritability
- Decreased motivation and sense of control

Long Term:

- Anxiety about lack of sleep
- Excessive fatigue
- Faulty judgment/poor decision making
- Longer periods of depression or relapse
- Lowered immune function
- High blood pressure
- Reduced psychomotor skills and cognitive skills (e.g. driving)

Causes of Sleep Disturbances

- Psychological stress / anxiety
- Trauma
- Lack of exercise
- Adolescence-related challenges
- Sleep apnoea
- Circadian rhythm disorders
- Menopause
- Diet
- Chronic pain
- Blood disorders
- Bladder control
- Headaches
- Daytime napping
- Depression / other mood disorders
- Nightmares / disturbing vivid dreams
- Shift work
- Alcohol / substance misuse
- Snoring
- Neuromuscular disorders (night sweats)
- Medication
- Obesity
- Illness / infection
- Ageing
- Genetic factors (family history)
- Oversleeping
- Lucid dreams

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What can help promote good sleep?

Rather than worrying about not getting enough sleep or attempting to force yourself to sleep, gently reassure yourself at least you are getting rest if not actually sleeping. Try to avoid making the bed a battlefield that stirs up an emotional reaction to sleeplessness!

Routine

- Have a “going to bed routine” – try calming activities pre-bedtime-soothing music, light reading, chamomile tea, mood lighting, relaxing bath etc.
- Go to bed at the same time each night – even on weekends and days off
- Avoid daytime napping – even when tired!
- Practice relaxation and meditation techniques at the same time every day (a good substitute for naps)
- Rise at the same time each day – even on weekends and days off and get out of bed as soon as you wake in the morning.
- Try to get some fresh air and sunshine on waking up.

Lifestyle

- Exercise regularly (not within 3 hours of going to bed)
- Cut out or cut down on stimulants, such as cigarettes, tea, coffee, chocolates, soft drinks, energy drinks, etc. (caffeine can stay in your system for up to 20 hours!)
- Reduce or cut out alcohol – avoid night caps
- Use your bed for sleep and intimacy only. Make sure the bedroom is dark and quiet (try using earplugs or eye-masks if necessary)

Bed time

- Find as comfortable a sleeping position as possible (body pillows are available to support upper and lower extremities and there are special pillows to promote neck comfort).
- Avoid physical, intellectual, or emotional hyper-stimulation in the later evening
- Avoid screens 2 hours before bed time.
- Avoid going to bed hungry or too full
- Lighting – lower the lighting or invest in some red light bulbs for lamps and use these in the hour leading up to sleep rather than LED or fluorescent lighting
- Try using essential oils and flower essences on your pillow to help induce sleep
- Sexual activity can be a good aid to sleep
- Massage (self or otherwise) and stretching exercises may help induce relaxation
- Get up and read a non-stimulating book if you wake up or can't go to sleep after 15 minutes, at 30 minute intervals go back to bed and try to sleep again

Am I getting the right nutrition for sleep?

There is increasing evidence to suggest that magnesium and calcium deficiency may contribute to disturbed sleep patterns and general sleep difficulties. It may be helpful to ask your doctor to test you prior to considering pharmacological interventions for sleep difficulties.

Calcium is a natural sleep aid that can help you fall asleep and have a restful sleep. Calcium contains tryptophan, an amino acid the body uses to produce the sleep inducing and maintaining natural hormone called ‘melatonin’ and serotonin. These two substances are neurotransmitters that slow down nerve transmissions, relaxing your brain and body and encouraging deep sleep. Calcium is necessary for the brain to convert tryptophan into melatonin.

Magnesium deficiency could result in chronic difficulties falling or staying asleep. Other indicators of magnesium difficulty include proneness to cramps, poor hydration, cold hands and feet, tightness in the neck and shoulders, twitches in small muscles, low energy levels, irritability, etc.

Research suggests that Magnesium is central to immune-competence and plays a crucial role in natural and adaptive immunity and quality of sleep. Magnesium is the key to the body's proper assimilation and use of calcium as well as vitamin D. Studies suggest that optimally, it is helpful to use twice as much elemental magnesium relative to the elemental calcium.

People with long-standing digestive issues may not absorb minerals so well and may benefit from trans-dermal sprays instead. Taking a hot bath with Epsom salts (magnesium sulphate) or using magnesium oil on skin promotes good absorption of magnesium.

Consuming foods containing the amino acid Tryptophan which is converted to Serotonin in the body can also assist sleep (peanuts, banana, milk).

****Always check with your doctor before taking supplements.***

Should I seek further psychological assistance?

Behavioural treatments can be used alone or in combination with pharmacological treatments and generally involve relaxation training, cognitive therapy and stimulus control. Medications are prescribed by a medical practitioner, so see your GP for a full medical to rule out physical causes for sleep disturbances.

If taking calcium and/or magnesium supplements, remember: magnesium supplements are best taken orally in a chelated form (such as citrate, ascorbate, orotate, glycinate or ideally a mix of them), in consultation with your doctor.

****Follow GP recommended dosage -- higher doses of the citrate form may cause diarrhoea; magnesium may also interact with other medications.***