

DIFFICULTY SLEEPING

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KEY POINTS

- Stressful events in your life, including medical issues, can cause problems with sleep.
- You may find that you sleep too much, too little, or have poor quality sleep.
- You can help your chances of getting good sleep by making sure your bedroom is comfortable, quiet, and dark, and by building a consistent routine for your sleep every day. It is often helpful to avoid screens for at least an hour before going to bed.
- Diet and lifestyle can affect your sleep, as can alcohol, recreational drugs, and some medications.
- Medications are available to help you sleep, but should usually only be used short-term, as they are often addictive and can make you drowsy, among other side effects.
- If you are struggling with your sleep, you can ask your GP or medical team for a referral to a sleep clinic.

What does it mean to have difficulty sleeping?

Problems with your sleep can take different forms. You might struggle with the **quantity** of sleep (i.e., sleeping for too long or not long enough) or with the **quality** of sleep (i.e., not sleeping deeply enough or waking up frequently).

There is no single “right” amount of sleep for everyone. However, it is usually considered best for adults to aim for **seven to nine hours per night**. It is normal for children and young people to sleep more, while older adults may find that they need less sleep.

Around one in four adults are estimated to have trouble with their sleep - either they don't get enough, or they do not sleep deeply enough to wake up rested.



What causes sleeping difficulties?

This can be caused by all kinds of issues. Some of the common causes of sleep difficulties across the whole population include:

- **Stress and anxiety.** Worrying about issues in your life often affects your sleep quality and quantity, making it difficult to fall asleep and disturbing the sleep you do get. This includes knowing you have to get up unusually early the next morning!
- **Poor sleeping environment.** A bedroom that is uncomfortable, too bright, too noisy, or otherwise poorly suited for sleep.
- **Lifestyle changes that affect your sleep patterns,** such as working night shifts, jet lag from moving between time zones, or late nights studying or partying.
- **Diet and drink.** Caffeine (found in coffee, tea, and some soft drinks like cola), alcohol, and large quantities of sugar can all affect your body's ability to wind down for sleep.
- **Mental health conditions,** particularly depression and schizophrenia, often affect both the quality and quantity of sleep.



However, people with long-term health conditions may also find that their sleep is affected by:

- **Pain or discomfort.** This is common in many health conditions and can prevent you from getting to sleep, or wake you up.
- **Breathing problems.** Breathlessness can cause stress and anxiety, as well as waking you up. In extreme cases, some people may briefly stop breathing while sleeping (“sleep apnoea”).
- **Neurological changes.** A brain injury, such as a stroke, can change your brain chemistry and make it more difficult to get good sleep, even when you are comfortable and calm.

- **Post-traumatic anxiety.** If you have experienced a health crisis, such as a stroke or heart attack, anxiety is very common, and can damage your sleep.
- **Some medications.** Check the labels and advice on any medication you are taking to see whether “sleep disturbances” or something similar are listed as a side effect. Antidepressants, epilepsy medications, and steroids are all associated with difficulty sleeping.
- **Chronic fatigue.** People with Long Covid, as well as many people who have had a stroke or other severe illness, may experience long-term (“chronic”) fatigue. This is an inability of the body to recover energy fully, and often leads to people sleeping more while also feeling less well-rested.

Why does sleep matter?

Sleep is vital for our bodies and minds. When we are asleep, our bodies do a lot of “maintenance” work. The right amount of good sleep is known to be important for:

- **Immunity** - fighting infections and preventing illness.
- **Memory** - it is thought that sleep is when we transfer memories from “short-term” to “long-term”, improving our ability to remember things in the future.
- **Digestion** - our gut acts differently when we are asleep, and this is important for properly digesting our food.
- **Hormones** - sleep sets the schedule for the release of several important hormones, making it vital for hormone balance.
- **Mental health** - poor sleep can lead to low mood, anxiety, irritability, and difficulty controlling your emotions.
- **Healing** - muscle, bone, and organ repair all ramp up during sleep, as well as the immune response to infections.



Luckily, there are some steps you can take if you feel that you are not getting enough sleep, or that your sleep is poor quality.

Different approaches work for different people, so do not worry if you cannot fix your sleep all at once! Keep trying different approaches, and speak to your doctor or health team if you are struggling with your sleep in the long term.

Managing your sleep

There are three main approaches you can take to help with your sleep. It is usually best to work your way down this list, rather than jumping directly to medical intervention!

1. **Sleep hygiene**
2. **Addressing the causes of poor sleep**
3. **Medical interventions**



Sleep hygiene

“Sleep hygiene” is a blanket term for lifestyle changes intended to promote a good environment for sleep. This might include:

- **Developing a reliable routine for when you go to bed and when you wake up in the mornings.** This helps to “train” your body to know when it should sleep.
- **Creating “rituals” around bedtime.** This could mean drinking a hot (uncaffeinated) drink, reading for ten minutes before bed, meditating, practising mindfulness, journalling, etc. - anything that separates bedtime from the rest of your day.
- **Ensuring your bed is comfortable for you,** and that your bedroom is the right temperature and humidity (dehumidifiers and humidifiers are both readily available through home goods retailers)
- **Reducing light and noise in your bedroom while trying to sleep.** Use blackout curtains or blinds where possible. If you cannot make changes to your bedroom to avoid light and/or noise, many people find that eye masks and earplugs help to cut out unwanted sensory input.
- **Staying off phones, computers, and other electronic devices** for at least an hour before bed.
- **Avoiding or reducing caffeine and sugar** in the afternoons and evenings.
- **Taking medications in the morning rather than the evening** if you think they may be preventing you from sleeping.
- **Not napping during the day.** This can disrupt your sleep schedule.
- **Exercising regularly if you can.** This helps to tire your body out and promote sleep, as well as being good for you in other ways.



Addressing the causes

The most common cause of poor sleep is stress. You may be able to take steps to reduce stress that may be affecting your sleep:

- **If you have a lot on your plate right now,** with work or life responsibilities piling up, list out the things that you have to do. This can help you to see whether there are responsibilities you can pass on to someone else, get help with, or come back to later.
- **If you are caring for someone with health problems,** you may be able to arrange respite care, to give you some breathing room and a chance to address other stresses in your life.
- **If you are struggling with work or school,** speak to a supervisor, teacher, or manager to see whether there is anything that can be changed to make life easier for you.
- **If you are having difficulty with trauma, mental health, or long-term anxiety,** psychotherapy can be helpful. You may be able to get referred through a GP, or find a private therapist. There are also self-help guides available online.

Relaxation techniques, mindfulness, and meditation, especially right before bed, can help to clear your mind and reduce stress. Speaking to a friend or family member about what's stressing you can help, too - a problem shared is a problem halved!

If you think that your sleep problems are caused by another issue, particularly if you think it may be a result of a health problem (physical or mental) or medication, you should speak to your doctor.

Many of the underlying conditions which affect sleep - such as breathing problems, stroke, or migraine - can be treated either through medication or through other treatments like pacing, rehabilitation exercises, or even surgery.

Even if your underlying condition cannot be cured, just knowing what is wrong can make a huge difference to your peace of mind - and that can improve your sleep, too!



Medical interventions

There are some medications and drug treatments which may be able to promote good sleep. You should not start any new medications without consulting your doctor.

Most medications used for sleep **should not be used long-term**, as they are often addictive and can affect your body in unexpected ways, but they can help in cases where serious sleep difficulties are making it hard to function.

You should not drive or operate heavy machinery after taking any of these medications, as they can make you drowsy and affect your concentration well into the next morning.

- **Melatonin** is a naturally-occurring hormone in the body, which regulates your sleep pattern. You can be prescribed melatonin supplements if your sleep cycles are seriously disrupted - it is most often offered to people over the age of 55.
- **Over-the-counter sleeping pills.** These are usually a form of antihistamine which makes you drowsy. You should not take them regularly unless a doctor tells you to, but they can be used occasionally to help you sleep.



If these medications are not helping, or if you feel that you have no alternative but to take them regularly in the long term, speak to your doctor about attending a **sleep clinic**.

Sleep clinics are specialist clinics which will observe you, ask you questions about your diet and lifestyle, and potentially ask you to sleep in the clinic while being monitored. Hopefully, this will help them to identify the underlying problem with your sleep, and to find a treatment that can address it directly.

What not to do

There are some things that can be tempting when you are struggling with your sleep, but which can make your sleep worse or cause other problems. In general, it is best to avoid:

- **Taking naps during the day.** This can disrupt your sleep cycle, and while you may feel less tired afterwards, you are likely to have trouble sleeping at night.
- **Using caffeine, sugary food, or drugs to “wake yourself up”.** Any stimulant (something that gives you energy) will also affect your sleep cycle, and you are likely to have more trouble sleeping after you take them. You may be more awake in the short term, but in the long term, the damage to your sleep patterns is rarely worth it!
- **Herbal remedies, particularly valerian.** These may help with your sleep, but can have unexpected side effects, especially as they can interact with other medications you are taking. Remember, herbal remedies are still medications: you should only take them with the approval of a qualified doctor!
- **Sleeping in late frequently.** It can be unavoidable to sleep late when you are struggling with your sleep. However, if you are able to get up at a regular time, even when you still feel tired, this will help to set a regular sleeping schedule and make it easier to get to sleep the following night.
- **Smoking cannabis or tobacco, or drinking alcohol, to help you relax.** These kinds of drugs may make you feel more relaxed and less stressed, but they also tend to reduce the quality of your sleep. Drugs, tobacco, and alcohol all affect your brain chemistry and can upset the natural rhythm of your body.



Finding support

Sleep Action

Website: www.sleepaction.org

Email: enquiries@sleepaction.org

Scotland's oldest sleep charity. Offers training/information on managing sleep, and sleep counselling for children and youth.

NHS Inform Self-Help Sleep guide

Website: www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/mental-health/mental-health-self-help-guides/sleep-problems-and-insomniatl-help-guide

An online guide to help you through the process of recognising the causes of poor sleep and managing your sleep.

SleepStation

Website: www.sleepstation.org.uk

Email: info@sleepstation.org.uk

Tel.: **0333 800 9404**

An online sleep improvement programme which uses Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for insomnia (CBTi). You can get free access through the NHS, or pay for private access.

Sleepio

Website: www.sleepio.com

A six-week CBTi-based sleep improvement programme, run from an app on your phone or computer. You can ask your GP for a referral to get free access through the NHS.

All of Chest Heart and Stroke Scotland's booklets and factsheets can be found online or ordered in print at www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub

You might find the following documents helpful:

Brain Fog Factsheet

Tiredness and Fatigue Essential Guide

Energy Tracker/Energy Mapping Worksheets

Mental Wellbeing Essential Guide

Physical Activity Essential Guide

Chronic Pain Essential Guide

You can also get personal support, information, and advice by calling our Advice Line on **0808 801 0899** or texting **NURSE** to **66777**.

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Find a range of easy-to-read booklets and factsheets at our resources hub:

www.chss.org.uk/resources-hub

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