

Sleep FAQs

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How many hours of sleep does a person need?

The average adult needs 6-9 hours of sleep. Consistently getting less than 6 hours per night leads to a range of health consequences, and consistently getting more than 9 hours leads to excessive lethargy and fatigue.

What causes poor sleep?

Stress, low mood, worry, sleep conditions (e.g., sleep apnea), health conditions (e.g., pain), medications, and worry about not getting enough sleep can all be contributors to poor sleep.

Is there an ideal set bedtime?

The most important thing is to have a fixed and regular wakeup time (as our wakeup time 'resets' our internal biological clock). It is important to go to sleep when you are sleepy (not just tired).

If I can't fall asleep should I lie in bed, count sheep, or just remain quiet until I fall back asleep?

No – get out of bed if you can't fall asleep within about 20 minutes. Your bed should serve as a conditioned stimulus for sleep (i.e., it should trigger the sleep state); so, you want to avoid doing anything other than sleep (and sex) in bed. Lying in bed and worrying associates the state of worry with your bed, which interferes with sleep.

I can fall asleep okay but have poor sleep later in the night – does that mean that I don't have insomnia?

Insomnia can present in several different ways – difficulty falling asleep, difficulty staying asleep, early morning awakening or sleeping an adequate number of hours yet waking up feeling unrefreshed or tired.



I find having a drink or two of alcohol helps me sleep better; is this okay?

If you have sleep problems, no! Even one drink can impair the quality of sleep and its restorative value. Alcohol can help you initially fall asleep, but the quality of that sleep will be poorer than the quality if you have no alcohol.

If I'm having sleep problems, should I track how many times I wake up and for how long?

Tracking patterns in your sleep can be okay if you do the tracking in the morning. "Clock-watching" interferes with sleep, so you should turn your clock away from you, so you can't see what time it is when you wake up in the night, as this can add to anxiety.

If my sleep has been impaired for months, how long will it take for me to catch up?

Most people will catch up on a sleep debt within a few days (i.e., 3-4 days). It is a myth that we need weeks or months to catch up on impaired sleep; our body simply doesn't make up for sleep debt in that way.

I have a big deadline coming up – is it okay for me to 'cheat' on my sleep?

It depends on how sensitive you are to sleep disruptions/problems – many people have no problem cheating on the amount of sleep they need for a short while (e.g., a few days at a time) as long as they can catch-up on their sleep later that week or on the weekend.

Because snoring is such a common problem among men, it can't be harmful, can it?

Not true – heavy snoring (particularly when associated with multiple awakenings in the night) can be a sign of a serious condition called sleep apnea. If you are a heavy snorer, experience excessive daytime sleepiness, and wake up coughing/gasping in the night, see your family physician and request "overnight oximetry" (a simple test that can help with screening for sleep apnea).

Is it true that older people need fewer hours of sleep?

No – with age the number of night-time awakenings often increases, but the overall need for sleep (6-9 hours) remains the same.



Do sleeping pills work?

Yes, sleeping pills can work for many people on a short-term basis, but it is important to keep in mind that sleeping medications are only approved for and intended for short-term (i.e., maximum 5-10 days) use at a time. It is much more important to identify the underlying cause(s) of your sleep problems, and work to solve these.

Does melatonin work?

Yes, there is evidence that many people will benefit from taking up to 3mg of melatonin, taken half an hour to an hour before sleep.

What is the best treatment for sleep problems?

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) approaches are the most effective solution for chronic sleep problems (assuming there is no underlying physiological or medical condition contributing to the sleep problem). CBT focuses on helping to identify the underlying causes and triggers of sleep problems and works to problem-solve those. There is a heavy focus on thinking patterns (worry, anxiety) and behaviours that interfere with sleep.

