



PJEndicott

# Sleep Well!

## Sleep is vital to health and wellbeing

Sleep is absolutely vital to good health and wellbeing. Recent research by Dr Neil Stanley at the University of East Anglia showed that missing out on just one hour of sleep at night will make us 27% less effective the next afternoon. In her bestselling book 'Take A Nap!', author and researcher Dr Sara Mednick details how lack of sleep has contributed to some of the best known disasters worldwide.

**Not sleeping and then driving can be as dangerous as drinking and driving** - studies show that staying awake for seventeen hours or more can have the same affect on your mind as a blood alcohol level of 0.05%; the legal limit for driving. The research was conducted in the United States but the effects will be much the same in the UK.

## How much sleep do we need?

The amount of sleep needed varies from one person to the next but is generally accepted to be around 8 – 9 hours per night. Age, type of work undertaken and

### What is insomnia?

Insomnia is a condition where you do not get enough sleep or enough quality sleep. Good sleep is not necessarily related to the number of hours that you sleep, however. Some people feel fine after getting five hours of sleep per night. Others need nine hours of sleep to feel at their best.

### Insomnia can be:

**Chronic:** Chronic insomnia sufferers constantly have trouble sleeping and have had this difficulty on most nights for at least a month.

**Intermittent:** Those who have intermittent insomnia do not experience sleepless nights constantly but do have periods of sleepless nights that recur over a longer period of time.

**Transient:** Transient insomnia occurs for short periods of time, up to a couple of weeks.

### The symptoms of insomnia can include:

- difficulty falling asleep
- difficulty staying asleep
- waking up too early.

### As a result, you may feel:

- cranky
- depressed
- tired
- unable to concentrate.

Lack of sleep can also affect your immune system.

## Causes of Disrupted Sleep

Disrupted sleep is a general term that refers to any condition in which sleep doesn't follow its normal cycle and/or a particular cycle doesn't last as long as it should. Some of the common risk factors associated with disrupted sleep include:

- food and drink consumed during the day
- drug and alcohol use
- caffeine consumption
- mood disorders such as depression
- sleep environment
- snoring
- use of prescription medication
- anxiety
- changes in work schedules
- jet lag
- noise
- pain
- smoking cigarettes
- stress
- temperature changes
- worrying about not sleeping.

## The effects of poor sleep

Not only do we feel tired when we are short on sleep, we can also become accident prone, irritable and grumpy.

In addition, lack of sleep affects:

- our powers of concentration
- our ability to make decisions
- our mood
- our speech
- our reactions

and can lead to:

- weight gain (lack of sleep has been linked to obesity).
- blurred vision and dizziness
- depression (depression can cause a lack of sleep, and can also arise from sleep deprivation.)
- heart disease and hypertension (high blood pressure)
- irritability
- memory loss and poor attention span
- nausea

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## Be watchful in the afternoon

At first sight this might seem a crazy notion but there are many substances that act as stimulants on the human body and contribute to restlessness and lack of sleep at night. Start off by watching diet from 4:00 pm onwards.

- Caffeine perks up the brain for about one hour, but lasts in the body for at least 4 – 6 hours. Therefore try to restrict caffeine intake to before 4:00 PM. Caffeine is found in a wide range of food and drink but especially in tea, coffee, Coke and Pepsi, energy drinks and decaffeinated drinks (5ms/100mls average).
- Watch out for hidden sources of caffeine! If your favourite pain relief has 'Super', 'Extra' or 'Plus' on the packet it is most likely to contain caffeine as a way of speeding up the metabolism so that the pain relief takes effect more quickly. After 4:00 PM swap to plain tablets.
- Exercise earlier in the day is attributed with causing the body to produce both endorphins (the body's natural pain relief) and serotonin (the happy hormones), also leading to better sleep.
- Avoid napping during the day.

## Be watchful in the evening

- Avoid caffeine, alcohol or nicotine in the evening due to their stimulant effects.
- Avoid excess fluids before bedtime.

## Get sleep off to a good start

- Carbohydrates have a soporific effect – saving carbohydrates for your evening meal or pre-bedtime snack can help. However, avoid heavy meals just before bedtime
- Avoid reading or watching TV in bed – most people feel that
- Try to set a regular time for bed. An occasional late night will not matter too much but sleeping less than you need on a regular basis makes it more difficult to get to sleep and to stay asleep.
- Granny really was right about having a hot milky drink before bedtime! Milk contains high levels of tryptophan and research has shown that this affects two parts of the brain making us feel full up (i.e. not hungry) so we sleep more soundly. The other food source high in tryptophan is turkey – maybe this is why we all fall asleep after our Christmas dinner? Tryptophan also contributes to the production of serotonin (the natural anti-depressant hormone) making us feel relaxed and content.
- Ensure that your room remains at a steady temperature which is neither too hot nor too cold.

- Keep your bedroom as dark as possible as any light source can interrupt sleep. It may be worth investing in a black-out blind.
- Likewise, try to keep noise in the bedroom to a minimum. Although keeping a small window open to maintain a stream of fresh air is preferable, if the outside environment is noisy you may need to close it.
- If all else fails - use '90 seconds to sleep' to fool your brain into switching off!

## 90 Seconds to Sleep!

This is a useful routine taught to me by a friend who is a therapeutic counsellor. It uses the knowledge from Neuro Linguistic Programming that our eyes move in certain patterns when we think about something. When worried or suffering from stress it is difficult to get the brain to 'switch off' and to let us sleep, thought themes keep appearing in our conscious brain as if the deeper or unconscious part of our brain is saying 'You can't go to sleep yet – we have all these problems to solve!'. To use 90 seconds to sleep effectively you will need to be very disciplined but once learned it can be used over and over again.

- Make sure you are comfortable, and neither too hot nor too cold.
- Focus your eyes on a spot on the wall or ceiling.
- Breathe slowly, deeply and rhythmically counting to five as your breathe in, and to five as your breathe out as well.
- Allow your mind to clear of all the thoughts of the day that has just been and the day that is to come.
- Continue with your breathing and you will find that after a short period your eyes will begin to move to one side or the other as your unconscious brain prepares to send thoughts for your consideration – or worry!
- As soon as you detect your eyes moving to the side, stop! Bring your focus back onto the spot on the wall or ceiling, clear your mind and continue to count as you breathe in and out to a count of five.
- Again, and again your mind will try to force you to think about your concerns. Refuse to follow these themes, concentrate on the spot and on your breathing.
- After around 90 seconds your brain should realise your intent, give up its disruptive behaviour and allow you to go to sleep. If you wake again during the night, repeat as often as you need.