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Sleeping well

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*Expert reviewers, Amy Gallagher, Senior Sleep Physiologist at The Cromwell Hospital and Jo Byfleet, Bupa Clinics GP and Physician in Charge
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Sleep is really important to your physical and [mental health](#). But sleeping well can sometimes be a challenge. If you're having trouble sleeping, it can be easy to underestimate the impact of simple changes in helping you to get a good night's sleep.



Why is sleep important?

[Sleep is good for your body](#) for lots of different reasons. It helps you to rest and recover from everything that's happened during the day. [When you sleep](#), your blood pressure drops, your heart rate gets slower, your muscles relax and your breathing gets deeper.

Missing out on a night or two of sleep won't affect your health. But if your sleepless nights go on for longer than this, it can take its toll. If you're having trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep and it's affecting how you feel in the day, you may have [insomnia](#).

Not getting enough sleep on a regular basis may also make you more likely to get [high blood pressure](#), [diabetes](#) and be [overweight](#). When you're struggling to sleep it also can affect your emotional wellbeing. One reason why you may find you can't sleep is because you're worrying about things that are going on in your life. This can then turn into worry and [anxiety](#) about the fact that you can't get to sleep and the cycle can go on and on.

Another cause of disrupted sleep which can make you feel really tired the next day is a condition called [obstructive sleep apnoea](#).

If you feel sleepy during the day, it's important not to do activities that may put you or others in danger if you're tired. This may include driving, operating machinery or having to make big decisions at work or home.



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How much sleep do I need?

Everyone needs a different amount of sleep to feel rested. So, what's right for you may not be right for someone else. Some people are able to function on fewer hours of sleep than others, but you should try to get the generally recommended amount of sleep.

You tend to need less sleep as you get older. In general:

- babies need around 12 to 17 hours sleep each day
- older children need about nine to 11 hours a night
- [teenagers](#) need around eight to 10 hours a night
- adults need about seven to nine hours sleep each night
- older adults (the over-65s) need around seven to eight hours, and tend to wake up more easily in the night

What's keeping you up at night?

One in three Brits are suffering from poor sleep. Take a look over our tips in The Sleep Series to help make sure you're getting the right amount of sleep each night.

[Learn more](#)

How to sleep better

If you're having trouble sleeping, there are lots of things you can do to help you sleep better. Have a think about how and where you sleep and your sleeping habits. These are often called sleep hygiene measures.

You may find it helpful to keep a diary of:

- the times you go to bed and wake up every day
- how long it takes you to get to sleep
- what activities you were doing before going to sleep
- if you wake in the night
- if you're tired in the day
- everything you eat and drink in the day – and when

- what you've done during the day
- how much exercise you get in the day – and when

After doing this for around two weeks, you may notice a pattern or some bad habits around sleep and bedtime. You may be able to make some changes to your daily routine.

Bupa's [Six steps to a sound night's sleep opens in a new window](#).

Bedroom environment

Check your bedroom is as comfortable as possible.

- Being too hot or too cold in the night can affect your sleep. The best temperature for sleep is 18 degrees, give or take a few degrees. So, adjust your heating and layer your bedding to find the right temperature for you.
- Lots of different noises – for example, street sounds and wildlife noises – can wake you in the night. Earplugs may help. If your partner snores, encourage them to seek medical advice.
- Your bedroom needs to be dark at night. Too much light can make it harder to sleep. You may need thicker curtains or blackout blinds if you're blasted with sunlight in the morning, especially in the summer. Or you could try wearing an eye mask.

Create a sleep zone

Only use your bedroom for sleep or sex. If you work, eat or watch TV in your bedroom, you may find it hard to switch off and go to sleep. The light (especially blue light) and stimulation from electronic devices can activate parts of your brain and keep you awake. It can affect your body's ability to produce the sleep hormone melatonin and disrupt your body's natural cycle (circadian rhythm).

If you have trouble sleeping, it's even more important not to use electronic devices before you go to bed.

Mattress

If your mattress is too firm or too soft, it won't support you properly. This can make your back or hips hurt. Aim to replace your mattress every 10 years to get the best support and comfort.

Relaxing

If you're feeling stressed, try to deal with what's causing your [stress](#) or [worries](#) during the day, rather than in the evenings. If you can't stop thinking about everything going on in your life, it may help if you keep a notebook and pen by your bed. When you're struggling to fall asleep or you wake up in the night, write down your worries or the things you're thinking about. This will help to organise your thoughts, rather than going over them in your head. Then you can deal with them the next day.

Practising [relaxation techniques](#) before going to bed may help by making you feel calmer.

Try [reading](#) or listening to some relaxing music.

If you really can't sleep, don't lie there worrying about it. If you don't fall asleep within 20 minutes, get up and do something relaxing. But don't turn on all the lights. Try reading or listen

to some relaxing music or a podcast on guided meditation. Then go back to bed when you feel sleepy.

Eat right

What you eat and drink, and when you do it, can affect your energy levels and how well you sleep.

- **Caffeine.** Drinking tea, coffee or energy drinks before you go to bed may stop you falling asleep. This is because caffeine is a stimulant. Steer clear of caffeine-containing foods (such as chocolate) and drinks from mid-afternoon. In the evening, choose a caffeine-free herbal tea or a warm, milky drink instead.
- **Alcohol.** You may think having a glass of wine in the evening will help you nod off. But it can make you wake up in the night. If you have trouble sleeping, steer clear of alcohol for at least six hours before you go to bed.
- **Sugary foods.** These can stimulate your body, which means you may find it harder to fall asleep and stay asleep.
- **Heavy meals.** If you eat too late at night, this can affect how well you sleep. But going to bed hungry can also stop you sleeping well, so don't eat too early either.

Get active

Regular exercise is a great way to help you sleep better. It helps to ease any stress and anxiety. Try exercising during the day or early evening. Don't exercise after around 6 or 7pm. If you do intense exercise too close to bedtime, you may have too much energy, which can delay sleepiness.

Stop smoking

Smoking can make you feel less refreshed when you wake up in the morning. It can also make the insides of your nose and airways swell up, affecting your breathing.

This may make you more likely to have **obstructive sleep apnoea**, which can stop you sleeping. Tobacco is a stimulant, so you may find it harder to get to sleep if you smoke. If you do smoke, don't smoke for at least an hour before you go to bed.

Giving up smoking may help you sleep better. For advice on giving up smoking, speak to your pharmacist or GP.

Get into a routine

Getting into a good sleep routine may help you sleep better. Try to stick to the following.

- Go to bed and get up at about the same times each day, even on a weekend. It's tempting to have a lie-in after a late night, but this will only make it harder for you to sleep the next night. This is because it resets your sleep cycle, so you need less sleep.
- Try not to nap during the day. But if you really feel you have to, keep it short (no more than 40 minutes) and don't have a nap after 3pm.

- Establish a regular bedtime routine – this is just as important for adults as children. Take some time out to relax and wind down before you go to bed. Have a soothing bath, sit in a quiet place or read a book for at least half an hour before you go to sleep.

Sleep and relaxation therapies

- [Talking therapies](#) may help your mood and help you to sleep better. [Cognitive behavioural therapy \(CBT\)](#) works by changing how you respond to anything that's worrying you and stopping you from sleeping.
- Sleep restriction therapy. This limits how long you spend in bed lying awake, so you go to bed later. This should hopefully make you sleep quicker and soundly.
- [Progressive muscle relaxation](#). This relaxation therapy involves tensing and then releasing your muscles, one by one.

When to seek help

If you keep having a bad night's sleep and it's affecting your quality of life, see your GP. Make an appointment if your sleep problems are causing you to feel:

- very tired
- irritable and moody
- generally unwell
- it's hard to concentrate or remember things

They'll discuss your sleeping habits with you and give you advice and support. They may even refer you to see a sleep specialist.

If you need help now

This page is designed to provide general health information. If you need help now, please use the following services.

- Samaritans
116 123 (UK and ROI) This helpline is free for you to call and talk to someone.
www.samaritans.org
- NHS Services has a list of [where to get urgent help for mental health](#).
- [Mind website](#). Click on the yellow 'Get help now' button at the top left of the page. This is a tool that is designed to help you understand what's happening to you and how you can help yourself.

If you think you might harm yourself or are worried someone else might come to immediate harm, call the emergency services on 999 or go to your local accident and emergency department.

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