

Counting down to a good night's sleep

For some people, getting a good night's sleep can be a major problem. While the amount of sleep we need decreases as we get older, quality of sleep is what will enable us to get the most out of the following day.

A variety of factors can cause poor sleep. These include anxiety, depression, stress, illness, pain, breathing and snoring problems, restless legs syndrome and some medicines.

If you are experiencing problems sleeping it's important to determine the underlying cause in order to treat it properly. Consult your doctor for help in diagnosing the problem. Difficulty in getting to sleep can sometimes be due to anxiety; waking during the middle of the night might be due to medical problems or pain; early morning awakening can sometimes be due to depression.

Some medicines can keep you awake – discuss this with your doctor or pharmacist. Sometimes a simple dose adjustment or altering the timing of the dose can help.

Good sleep advice to improve the quality of your sleep includes:

- Wake and get up at the same time each morning, even if you've had a poor night's sleep. Use light to assist waking.
- Try to avoid napping during the day. If you need to nap, try to keep it to 20 minutes. Do not nap after 3 pm.
- Regular exercise and sunshine help you sleep better, so be active and spend time outside during the day. Try to get at least 30 minutes of at least moderate intensity exercise on most days, preferably early in the day. Avoid exercising just before bed.
- Avoid drinking alcohol – although alcohol may help you go to sleep, using alcohol can lead to poorer quality sleep and more night-time waking.
- Avoid caffeine-containing drinks (tea, including green tea, coffee, cocoa, chocolate, cola, guarana and yerba mate) from mid-afternoon onwards. Caffeine wakes up the brain. Have a cup of warm milk or a carbohydrate snack instead.
- Avoid smoking in the late afternoon and evening.
- Get your body into 'going to sleep' mode by winding down with quiet activities and a regular 'going to bed' routine in the hour or so before bedtime.
- Keep the bed for sleep and sex only – don't read or watch TV, make phone calls, or eat in bed.
- Ensure the room is dark – use heavy curtains, and remove the digital clock and any other light source from the bedroom
- A comfortable temperature and comfortable mattress might help you sleep better.
- Learn some relaxation techniques, and use them when you can't get to sleep. Focusing on your breathing and using progressive muscle relaxation techniques can help.
- Keep a notepad and pen beside the bed. If something is worrying you, write it down, then relax and try again to get to sleep.
- If you can't get to sleep after about 20 minutes, get up and do something relaxing until you feel tired, then try again to get to sleep.

Sleeping tablets are sometimes prescribed for short term or occasional use. Whilst sleeping tablets help you sleep, they may give you a less deep sleep and can also have side effects. They should always be used with care — follow your health professional's instructions and make sure they know about any other medicines you are taking.