

# IS YOUR SLEEP AFFECTED DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

Most of us are experiencing unexpected changes in the way we live and the way we work; we are having to adapt very quickly. Good sleep can be one of the main casualties. Let's look at sleep and how we can improve it.

## SLEEP IS THE NEW COOL...HOW IT HELPS OUR HEALTH & WELLBEING

- When we sleep well, we wake up feeling refreshed and alert for our daily activities. Sleep affects how we look, feel and perform on a daily basis and can have a major impact on our overall quality of life. So when we are anxious about things, it can affect our sleep and, hence, how we feel.
- To get the most out of your sleep, both quantity and quality are important. If sleep is cut short, your body doesn't have time to complete all of the phases needed for muscle repair, memory consolidation and release of hormones regulating growth and appetite.
- Sleep helps us thrive by contributing to a healthy immune system.
- It can also balance our appetites by helping to regulate levels of the hormones that play a role in our feelings of hunger and fullness. So when we're sleep deprived, we may feel the need to eat more, which can lead to weight gain.
- The one-third of our lives that we spend sleeping, far from being "unproductive," plays a direct role in how full, energetic and successful the other two-thirds of our lives can be.



## WHAT IS SLEEP MADE UP OF AND HOW MUCH DO WE NEED?

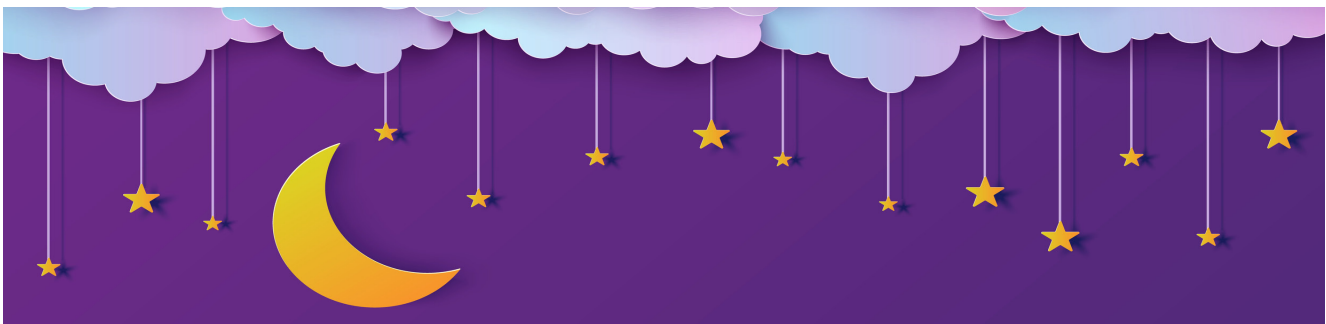
- Sleep follows a pattern of alternating **REM (rapid eye movement) and NREM (non-rapid eye movement) sleep** throughout a typical night, in a cycle that repeats itself about every 90 minutes. We need all of these cycles to keep ourselves well.
- Although research cannot pinpoint the exact amount of sleep need by people at different ages, it's thought that adults between 26-64 need between **seven to nine hours a night**. However, it's important to pay attention to your own individual needs by assessing how you feel with different amounts of sleep.

## CIRCADIAN RHYTHMS

- Circadian rhythms are the **cycles** that tell the body when to sleep, wake, and eat. They are the biological and psychological processes that fluctuate in predictable patterns each day.
- They are influenced by external cues such as **sunlight and temperature**, which help determine whether you feel energetic or worn out at different times of the day. They are governed by an internal “master clock”, located in the brain
- This clock translates cues from outside the body into instructions for the inside of the body, e.g. receptors in your eyes detect sunlight and pass that signal along to that part of your brain, which then stimulates the production of **melatonin**, the hormone that causes sleepiness.
- **When your circadian rhythms are disrupted**, it can impact on the quality of your sleep, obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular problems and some mental health issues.

**So pay attention to your body clock.** Try to:

- Wake up and go to sleep at the same time each day
- Expose yourself to sunlight and darkness at those times to support steady melatonin production
- Avoiding TV/phone/tablet screens in the evening will also help.



## THE MAIN CONDITIONS AFFECTING SLEEP

- **Insomnia:** where you regularly have problems sleeping. It’s caused by a variety of external and internal factors, including worry. It usually gets better by practising good sleep hygiene (see later).
  - **Sleep apnoea:** where your breathing stops and starts while you sleep. Symptoms may include: (i) breathing stopping and starting while asleep (ii) gasping, snorting or choking sounds while asleep (iii) feeling very tired during the day. Without treatment, sleep apnoea can cause health problems, so speak to your doctor if you have concerns.
  - **Narcolepsy:** a rare long-term condition causing a person to suddenly fall asleep at inappropriate times. Their brain cannot regulate sleeping and waking patterns normally and it can cause long-term health problems. Read more at [www.narcolepsy.org.uk/](http://www.narcolepsy.org.uk/)
  - **Restless legs syndrome:** is a common condition that causes an overwhelming urge to move the legs. The main symptoms can include (i) an overwhelming urge to move your legs (ii) an unpleasant crawling or creeping sensation in the feet, calves and thighs (iii) involuntary jerking of the legs and arms in sleep. Avoiding caffeine/alcohol late in the day, stopping smoking and exercising regularly are known to help.
-

## LET'S GET SOME SLEEP! ALL ABOUT GOOD SLEEP HYGIENE

- **Keep your room cool:** a cool 16-18°C (60-65°F) is thought to be an ideal temperature in a bedroom. Temperatures over 24°C (71°F) are likely to cause restlessness, while a cold room of about 12°C (53°F) will make it difficult to drop off.
- **Keep your room dark:** when we see light, our bodies assume it's time to wake up. When it's dark, we release melatonin, which relaxes the body and helps us to drift off. Try blackout blinds or an eye mask.
- **Sleep in a comfortable bed:** visit [www.bedfed.org.uk/bed-buyers-guide/](http://www.bedfed.org.uk/bed-buyers-guide/) for bed-buying tips, or [www.sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-hub/bedroom-matters/mattresses-and-sleep/](http://www.sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-hub/bedroom-matters/mattresses-and-sleep/) for what to look for in a mattress.
- **Keep your bedroom for sleeping:** don't bring computers, phones, television or gadgets into the bedroom – your bedroom is your sanctuary.
- **Loud noise can be a real problem.** Try earplugs or white noise machines, or even consider double glazing.
- **Try a nodcast!** These are soothing sounds to help you drop off to sleep [www.sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-tools/nodcasts/](http://www.sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-tools/nodcasts/)
- **Relax:** have a bath, use scented oils like lavender or try some meditation.
- **The Headspace app** [www.headspace.com/](http://www.headspace.com/) has some good 10-15 minute sessions to help you wind down, including deep breathing.
- **Avoid caffeine after midday:** this can include tea, coffee, cola and chocolate.
- Don't drink more than your suggested **alcohol units**, particularly near bedtime
- **Stay hydrated:** drink 6-8 glasses of water during the day.
- **Stick to regular times** to go to bed and get up.
- **Don't eat a heavy meal** too close to bedtime.
- **Use a sleep diary** to track how you really sleep [www.sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-tools/sleep-diary/](http://www.sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-tools/sleep-diary/)
- The Sleep Council offers a **30-day plan** [www.sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-tools/30-day-sleep-plan/](http://www.sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-tools/30-day-sleep-plan/)
- **Check out Moodzone**, which explains what you can do to help yourself sleep better (CBT-based) [www.nhs.uk/Video/Pages/sleep-problems-podcast.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Video/Pages/sleep-problems-podcast.aspx)
- There's also a **great app** to help you sleep (CBT-based) [www.sleepio.com/](http://www.sleepio.com/)
- If your sleep problems are affecting your daily life, it's time to **speak your GP**.

