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NHS Foundation Trust



**A good night's sleep**

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## A good night's sleep

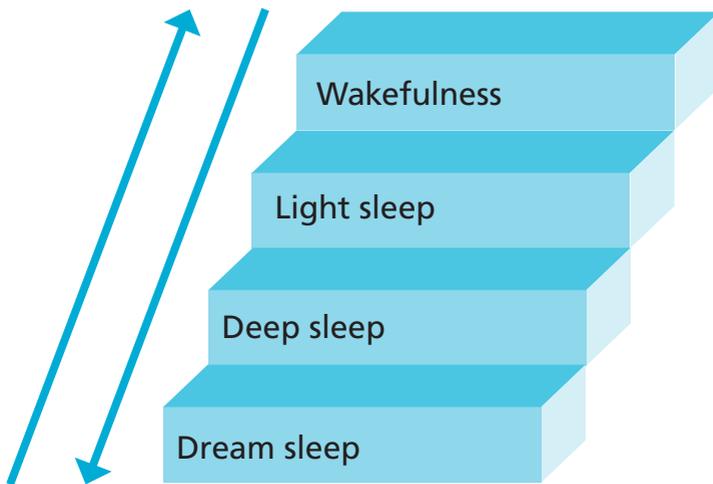
A good night's sleep is often taken for granted by those who sleep well. Unfortunately this is not the case for everyone. Many people in the UK are likely to be suffering from some form of undiagnosed sleep disorder, which may result in excessive daytime sleepiness (EDS). By this, we mean an increased urge to sleep during the day usually accompanied by a lack of energy, despite having had an adequate night's sleep.

Obstructive sleep apnoea, narcolepsy and restless legs syndrome are all examples of sleep disorders that can result in EDS, however there may be a simpler explanation for this which relates to sleeping habits or routines. These include the environment and timing of sleep and other influences such as consumption of stimulants like tea or coffee. These considerations can also be referred to as sleep hygiene. EDS can also be caused by simply not sleeping for long enough; in fact this is the commonest cause of EDS.

## What happens when we sleep?

Falling asleep is a natural, unforced process whereby the body and mind wind down until sleep occurs.

The body moves through different stages of sleep from light to deeper sleep. This happens in cycles, moving up and down the stages several times during the night. During each stage, very important processes take place that restore the body in preparation for a new day. These include tissue regeneration, immune system strengthening, metabolism, memory, learning, and other vital functions.



## Environment

The bedroom should be a relaxing environment to help the natural process of falling and staying asleep. The following is a list of important factors to creating the most beneficial conditions:

- **Temperature** – bedroom temperature should be slightly cooler than rest of the house
- **Light** – not too light to disturb sleep, particularly in the summer months with early sunrise. Adequate curtains or blinds are useful and use an eye mask if necessary
- **Noise** – free from outside disturbance, using ear plugs if required
- **Comfort** – a change of bed may be required, particularly if the mattress is old
- **Relaxing** – free from TV and computers (as these produce brain-stimulating light). Bedrooms should not be used for eating or activities of work. Place clocks away from vision, as clock-watching inhibits sleep!

## Timing

Going to bed and getting up at the same time seven days a week is important to establish a good routine. Some nights your sleep will be better than others but it is still important not to break the pattern. This is because the body works best in rhythms and will get used to preparing for sleep and getting up at certain times. It is also important that this routine should allow for enough sleep time.

Everyone is different and some need less sleep than others and this may also change with age. The key point is that sleep should be refreshing. You should ideally avoid napping during the day as this may make it harder to fall asleep at night. If your sleep routine is working i.e. allowing sufficient sleep, generally you should feel refreshed on waking and feel alert throughout the day.

Not getting enough sleep and can lead to feelings of tiredness or sleepiness and may affect mood and concentration. However, spending too much time in bed if you are sleeping poorly can also cause problems.

## Other factors

### Caffeine

Caffeine during the day in modest amounts is unlikely to cause sleep problems, however caffeine does have long-lasting effects and it may disrupt your sleep if consumed after 5pm. Caffeine is found in tea, coffee, cola and many energy/stimulant drinks.

### Smoking

Nicotine is also an artificial stimulant and therefore it also should be avoided close to bedtime or during the night.

## Alcohol

Although consuming alcohol can make you feel sleepy and relaxed, unfortunately it has the ability to disrupt the normal flow of sleep, particularly in the latter half of the night where deep restorative sleep occurs. So whilst alcohol may aid 'dropping off', it may affect sleep quality and the important deep sleep restorative processes.

## Food

Timing meals is important as it is not helpful to go to sleep either whilst too full or hungry. Eating a large meal close to bedtime can make you uncomfortable and hinder dropping off to sleep. Being hungry is a stimulus and can increase alertness whilst trying to drop off to sleep.

## Exercise

Exercise is beneficial for health and wellbeing, however doing it too close to bedtime i.e. within three hours can act as a stimulus to body and mind making dropping off to sleep more difficult.

## Summary – Dos and Don'ts

### DO

- Create and maintain a regular sleep routine seven days a week with adequate time in bed – i.e. same amount of sleep and same retiring and getting up times
- Create a comfortable, quiet and relaxing bedroom
- Exercise regularly during the day
- Remember short awakenings are normal during sleep
- Remember sleep amount required will change with age

## DON'T

- Don't drink caffeine after 5pm
- Don't drink excessive alcohol close to bedtime
- Try not to smoke before bedtime
- Avoid exercise within three hours of bedtime
- Do not go to bed hungry or within two to three hours of eating a large meal
- Do not nap during the day or evening
- Do not lie in at the weekends
- Do not use your bedroom for anything other than sleep or sexual activity

## When to see a doctor

If you feel there is anything in particular affecting your sleep, for example medication or a medical condition, you should speak to your doctor. Poor sleep can also be caused by stress, anxiety, low mood and pain.

You should see a doctor if the following sleep hygiene tips are not helping your sleep quality and you are suffering from the following symptoms:

- Loud snoring with associated pauses in breathing (often reported by a sleep partner)
- Falling asleep at inappropriate or dangerous times, for example whilst talking to someone or driving
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Frequent morning headaches
- Physically acting out dreams during sleep
- Repeated sleepwalking, night terrors or any other abnormal activities occurring while asleep

- Inability to move whilst falling asleep or waking up
- Persistent daytime sleepiness or fatigue

## Insomnia

If you suffer from long standing difficulty getting to sleep, staying asleep or waking up earlier than normal despite getting sufficient time in bed, then you may be suffering from insomnia. Our current sleep service do not have the expertise to fully assess and treat insomnia. We recommend you see your GP and request a referral to the Neuropsychiatry sleep service at the Barberry, Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust for further specialist assessment.



The Trust provides free monthly health talks on a variety of medical conditions and treatments. For more information visit [www.uhb.nhs.uk/health-talks.htm](http://www.uhb.nhs.uk/health-talks.htm) or call 0121 371 4323.

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**Lung Function and Sleep**  
**Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham**  
Mindelsohn Way, Edgbaston, Birmingham B15 2GW  
Telephone: 0121 371 3870  
Open Mon–Fri, 09:00–17:00, (16:30 Fridays)

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