

Common sleep problems and solutions



There are a number of habits that we are all prone to which can cause sleep difficulties. Do any of these apply to you? If so you may not be getting as good a night's sleep as you could.

Most people's sleep problems revolve around:

- Having difficulty getting to sleep;
- Waking up during the night.

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Problems getting to sleep

Do you drink coffee, cola, or tea, within 4-6 hours of bedtime?

A hot drink at bedtime can be helpful, as long as it is not a stimulant such as coffee. Remember that coffee is not the only drink that contains caffeine. Tea also contains caffeine as well as most fizzy drinks.

Do you exercise vigorously 1-2 hours before bed time?

Although exercise is good for you and indeed can help with your sleeping, it doesn't do so if you exercise near bedtime.

Do you work/think about work right up to your bedtime?

Unwind before you go to bed. If you go to bed with the worries and stresses of the day still swimming through your head, you're guaranteed to lie awake for hours.

Get into the habit of doing something relaxing before you go to bed, like reading a book, taking a warm bath or listening to music.

Do you watch TV in bed (action movies/horror) or read exciting books?

Avoid watching TV or scrolling on your phone in bed. Bright light from these activities and the subject matter may make you stay wide awake! If it helps to read before sleep make sure you use only as much light as is needed to see your book.

Do you feel anxious, irritated, angry, worried?

Stress, anxiety and depression can all cause serious sleep difficulties. This may be due to an upsetting event or a temporary state of affairs. However, if it has persisted for more than a week or so, and particularly if you are waking up in early hours and being unable to get back to sleep, it may be worth discussing your problems with your doctor.

Do you eat late at night?

Eating a large heavy meal too close to bedtime will interfere with your sleep. Spicy or fatty foods may cause heartburn and foods containing tyramine (bacon, cheese, ham, aubergines, pepperoni, raspberries avocado, nuts, soy sauce, and red wine) might keep you awake at night.

Going to bed on a full stomach can cause disturbed sleep (as going to bed on an empty stomach can). Don't eat late, and have a light snack instead.

Do you have a regular schedule?

Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day (same time means within 30 minutes), even on weekends. If you feel you haven't slept well, resist the urge to sleep in longer than normal; getting up on schedule keeps your body in its normal wake-up routine.

Most of us have a natural dip in alertness between 2 - 4pm. A 15 minute nap when you're tired can be a very effective way of staying alert throughout the day.

Problems staying asleep / disturbed sleep

If you wake up often throughout the night due to disturbed sleep, or maybe you have a newborn or noisy neighbours try not to get irate and annoyed about it as this will make it harder for you to fall asleep. Stay calm, and make use of earbuds and an eye cover.

Do you drink alcohol within 2-3 hours of bedtime?

Know that the "night cap" has a price. Alcohol may help you to get to sleep but it will cause you to wake up throughout the night. You may not notice it. (It is worse if you have sleep apnoea because the alcohol

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makes the apnoea worse.) Sometimes people snore only if they have had some alcohol or may snore worse if they already snore.

Do you snore or ever wake up because of breathing difficulties?

If you have a sleeping partner, ask them if they notice any snoring or pauses in breathing. You may have a sleep disorder or you may just need to increase your awareness about your own sleep need. If you have any concerns see your doctor.

Do you find it difficult to keep your legs still, or feel restless?

Restless Leg Syndrome is a strange condition which becomes more common with age. The sufferer, shortly after going to bed, or during the night, feels an irresistible urge to move the lower limbs. Doing so relieves the sensation, but as they relax again, the sensation returns. It can be extremely troublesome and very disturbing to sleep.

Whilst it may seem a psychological problem, research has shown it to be associated with quite definite activity in certain parts of the brain. There are some medical treatments available, but they are of variable effectiveness. The simplest solution is often to get up and do something which taxes your brain a bit, such as reading.

Do you:

- Wake several times during the night for no apparent reason?
- Suddenly awake and cannot get back to sleep?
- Wake early in the morning before you would really like to do so?

While sleep problems do not mean that you are suffering from depression or anxiety, there is no doubt that sleep disorders are a prime symptom

of depression or anxiety. If you are finding that you are frequently waking up during the night and not able to get back to sleep and this is associated with feeling depressed and anxious, then you should consult your doctor.

Do you grind your teeth when sleeping?

Teeth grinding or bruxism is a more common complaint than one would imagine. There are a number of causes, but sleep disorders and stress come high on the list. So whilst there is no cure as such for the problem, dealing with the underlying stress and sleep disorders will do much to reduce the problem.

Do you sleep walk?

Sleep walking is more common in children, but not unknown in adults. Unlike nightmares, it tends to occur during deeper non-REM sleep and is therefore more likely to occur when the person is excessively tired. Stress and alcohol have been shown to contribute significantly to the problem, so these areas should be addressed if sleep walking is a problem.

Do nightmares frequently disturb your sleep?

During sleep you alternate between various stages or phases of sleep, one being known as REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep. While you dream throughout the night, during REM sleep the dreams are most intense. Some dreams are pleasant, some downright confusing and weird, and a minority are very unpleasant - nightmares. These can result in you awaking abruptly in a cold sweat and with a racing pulse.

Stress and worries play a big part in unpleasant sleep. However other factors, such as frightening things being on your mind will also cause your dreams to be frightening.

Is your sleep disturbed by having to get up to pass urine? (Males only)

There are several possible causes for this, often with a simple explanation. If the problem is causing you some concern, discuss it with your doctor. As many as 80% of males will suffer some problems with their prostate, a walnut-sized gland lying at the base of the bladder, with the majority being due to a benign condition that causes an increase in the size of the gland.

In turn, this causes problems with passing urine. Whilst some will require surgical intervention, many can be treated with drugs. The important point is not to ignore the condition. A small percentage can be due to malignancy, which can be treated if discovered early enough.

Even if it is not malignant, ignoring the condition can cause other urinary tract problems.

Do night sweats associated with the menopause disturb your sleep? (Women only)

Night sweats and hot flushes are a distressing symptom of the menopause. Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) may be considered.

Simple measures include avoiding a hot bedroom and excessive bedding, but are not particularly effective. Drug treatment (other than HRT) includes clonidine, which is only moderately effective and is not without its own side effects.

A number of herbal remedies are available, but there has been little research into their efficacy and they are not licensed as medical products. If you suspect this is a problem for you consult with your doctor.