

How to **sleep better**



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How to sleep better

Sleep (including the quality, quantity and timing of sleep) has a vital role for good mental health, influencing mood, focus, memory, and overall wellbeing.

When we sleep well, our brains process emotions more effectively to help us handle stress, our immune system functions better, and we learn and remember new information better. Many things, such as physical health, environment, sleep disorders, mental health and lifestyle, can disrupt the quality and quantity of our sleep.

Mental health challenges can also cause sleep problems. People experiencing mental health conditions are much more likely to struggle with poor sleep.¹

This guide explores the main influences on sleep, the common sleep problems people face, and practical tips to restore healthy, restorative sleep.

Sleep fact 1



Most adults sleep for around seven to eight hours a night. However, age, health, and work patterns often affect how much sleep we need, plus some people naturally sleep more or less than others.²

HEAL: the four pillars of good sleep

There are four main things that can affect the quality of our sleep:

H Health
E Environment
A Attitude
L Lifestyle

Good sleep doesn't just mean lots of sleep: it means the right amount of sleep at the right time. This will be different for different people.

Sleep affects our ability to use language, maintain attention, remember and understand what we are reading. If we compromise on our sleep, we compromise on our performance, mood, and relationships. Sleep has also been shown to protect the immune system.

The amount that each of us needs is different. However, it's recommended that a healthy adult sleep, on average, between seven and nine hours a night.

The important thing is that you get good quality sleep. The following advice can help to **HEAL** your sleep problems.

Health

As anyone who has tried to get to sleep with a blocked nose or headache knows, physical health problems can stop you from getting a good night's sleep.

Speaking to your GP or pharmacist about your sleep problem can help with this. But it's important not to take over the counter medication without first speaking to a health professional, as sometimes medication itself can stop you from sleeping properly if it's not right for you.

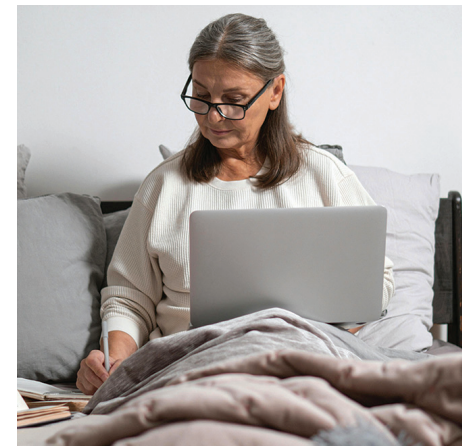
Mental health problems like anxiety and depression can also affect our sleep. In these cases, a combined approach that deals with both the mental health issue and the poor sleep is often the most effective method of treatment.

Speak to your GP or mental health worker (if you have one) for advice on this or have a look at the 'Attitude' and 'Lifestyle' sections of this guide for general ways to maintain good mental wellbeing.

Environment

Our sleep environment is very important for getting good quality sleep. It's important to recognize that access to an ideal sleep environment can vary widely due to personal, social, or economic circumstances. For some, factors like insecure housing or financial difficulties can make it difficult to create the 'ideal' conditions.

Where possible, try to remove distractions from your bedroom. Keep your bedroom as your sleep room. It's better to watch TV, play computer games and eat in another room. This helps you associate your bed with sleep.



Be aware of the presence of gadgets and electronics, such as computers, phones, tablets and TVs. The stimulation associated with social media interaction and phone gaming can lead to sleep disruption or can mean you get into bed later and don't get enough sleep. It's a good idea not to use these devices in the hour before you go to sleep and do something else to wind down.

Although we are all different and have our own personal preferences, the common factors that can affect our sleep are light, noise and temperature. Too much light or noise can prevent you from falling or staying asleep. If you can't control the amount of light and noise, such as light from a streetlamp



or noise from a neighbour's music, you could try using an eye mask or earplugs.

The temperature of the room is also important. A heater or thicker duvet can help if you regularly find yourself too cold at night, or a thinner cover or opening a window can help if you're too hot. If you are struggling to work out the best sleep environment for you, it can be useful to keep a [sleep diary](#) to keep track of the conditions that help you get a good night's sleep.

Attitude

Lying awake in bed, particularly before an important day, can make us worry. However, this worry can then make it harder for us to get to sleep.

Relaxation techniques can help you unwind at these times. Alternatively, instead of staying in bed and getting more and more frustrated, it is usually best to get up and read or make yourself a warm drink (avoid coffee, tea or any other caffeine drinks) and then return to bed when you feel relaxed and sleepy again.

If you're having problems sleeping for more than a month, you could speak with your GP about the possibility of using cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

CBT is commonly used to treat a lot of mental health problems. It can encourage a more positive attitude, which can help break the cycle of negative thoughts causing your lack of sleep, leading you to develop a healthier sleep pattern. In England, you can self-refer to [Improving Access to Psychological Therapies \(IAPT\)](#) (this may help reduce unnecessary use of GP time and speed referrals if talking treatments are appropriate).

Alternatively, practices like mindfulness (a type of meditation) can help by reducing stress and anxiety levels. Mindfulness can be practised without a GP prescription. Our [mindfulness guide](#) is a helpful introduction to simple mindfulness techniques.

Lifestyle

There are many lifestyle factors that you can bring into your everyday life to improve the quality of your sleep. These include the following.

Eating for good sleep: Food and drinks containing lots of caffeine can keep you awake, so drinking less tea and coffee after lunch might help you to sleep better. It's a good idea not to go to bed when very hungry or very full.



Being aware of the effects of alcohol:

Although it can make you feel tired and can help you get to sleep, alcohol impairs the quality of your sleep and makes you more likely to wake up during the night as the effects wear off. You may snore more and also need to go to the toilet frequently or get up to drink water if you are dehydrated.

Moving more: Exercising on a regular basis is thought to help us sleep, as, among other benefits, it can help to reduce anxiety and relieve stress. It is, however, important to exercise at the right time. Working out earlier in the day is better, as exercise increases the body's adrenaline production, making it more difficult to sleep if done just before bedtime.

Sleep fact 2



Only 15% of adults achieve the recommended 7-9 hours of sleep per night.³

How can mental health problems affect your sleep?

Mental health and sleep have a two-way relationship. If you don't get enough sleep, you may notice an increase in mental health problems, which can then further reduce your ability to sleep.

Mental health problems can affect sleep in the following ways:

- anxiety can cause racing thoughts from increased stress, making it harder to fall and stay asleep.
- depression may cause either too little sleep (insomnia) or too much sleep (hypersomnia). Excessive daytime sleep can disrupt your circadian rhythm, leading to an irregular sleep pattern.
- mania, which is associated with bipolar disorder, often reduces your ability to sleep and may lead to skipping sleep altogether.
- nightmares or night terrors can wake you up throughout the night and may create further anxiety about going to bed. These can be associated with PTSD but can happen without any previous trauma or trigger.
- medication you may need to treat mental health problems can cause weight gain which can be associated with snoring or sleep apnoea (pauses in breathing during sleep).

Sleep problems

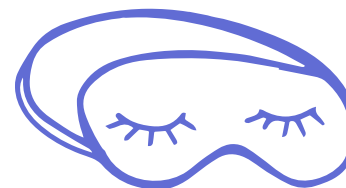
Sleep problems affect up to one-third of the population at some stage and affect how you feel, think, and function in daily life. Below are some of the most common sleep problems, with techniques that can be used to treat them.

Insomnia

Insomnia is a condition in which you are regularly unable to fall or remain asleep for a long enough period of time. As a result, insomnia can have a negative effect on your mood, energy levels, concentration, relationships, ability to stay awake throughout the day, and capacity to complete simple daily tasks.

One of the most widely used and successful therapies for treating insomnia is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). Regular daytime or early evening exercise can also be a great way to manage insomnia, as it helps to reduce anxiety and stress, as can practices such as mindfulness.

Speak to your GP if your insomnia persists.



Sleepwalking

Sleepwalking happens during deep, slow wave sleep, meaning people often don't remember much about it. As well as getting out of bed and walking, some people do things in their sleep, such as moving things or cleaning. Sleepwalking is far more common in children than in adults.

Sleepwalking is typically not dangerous unless you start doing risky activities in your sleep. It is often related to stress, irregular sleep routines, or (in adults) drinking alcohol, so it is important to try to get regular, good-quality sleep by looking at the **HEAL** factors mentioned earlier in this guide.

Night terrors

A night terror is different from a nightmare. It also occurs during deep sleep, meaning that you rarely remember it. Often an extreme and frightening experience, night terrors can make your heart beat faster and might cause you to sweat or scream.

Night terrors often begin in childhood, but usually happen less in adulthood.

Little is known about how to treat people who have regular night terrors, although, in some cases, they can be linked to a traumatic experience. If this is the case, and your night terrors are affecting your everyday life or ability to sleep, your GP might be able to refer you for therapy to help you deal with the underlying trauma.



Snoring

Snoring is a very common problem, affecting 41.5% of adults in the UK. Snoring is a breathing problem that happens when a blockage in the airway causes the organs that help us breathe to vibrate.

Sleeping on your side can reduce snoring, as sleeping on your back can cause your tongue to fall backwards and partially block your airflow. Drinking less alcohol, exercising more regularly, and taking steps to lose weight (if you are overweight) can also reduce your snoring.

Sleep apnoea

Sleep apnoea causes pauses or shallow breathing that can last up to 30 seconds. Breathing usually restarts with a loud snort or choking sound. People with sleep apnoea often wake up feeling sweaty, with a dry mouth and headache and are sleepy in the day when it is more severe.

Unlike snoring, sleep apnoea may need treatment to help sleep quality and stop sleepiness. A CPAP device or an oral appliance made by your dentist can help keep the airway open. Your GP can refer you for an assessment.

Sleep fact 3



Minority groups are disproportionately affected by poor sleep, likely due to social inequality.⁴

Other factors affecting sleep

Sleep is influenced not only by mental health and sleep disorders but also by socioeconomic factors. Research shows that socioeconomic stress leads to poorer sleep quality and shorter sleep duration.

Social deprivation means a lack of resources, opportunities, and social connections and is a strong predictor of poor sleep.⁵ For instance, refugees and people seeking asylum are more likely to experience poor sleep due to factors such as lack of stable housing, ongoing stress, and PTSD symptoms.⁶

Additionally, parents dealing with babies' irregular sleep schedules frequently experience sleep challenges.

People with chronic health conditions or long-term mental health issues also tend to have poorer sleep.

It's important to understand that many of these factors are outside a person's control, which can make managing sleep even more difficult.



Top sleep tips



Don't get caught napping (the wrong way)

If you have trouble sleeping, you may feel tempted to catch up on sleep by taking naps. Research shows that short naps, around 10 to 20 minutes, can boost alertness, memory, and mood. However, long or late afternoon naps can make it harder to drift off later and so you're best to avoid them if you are struggling to sleep at night. If you're feeling dangerously sleepy (while driving or operating machinery, for instance), a short nap can be helpful and even necessary. If you feel tired later in the day, get up and take a walk around, get some fresh air, or do something challenging for a short while, like a crossword or a Sudoku.



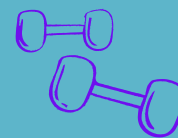
If you're not tired, get up

If you're finding it difficult to get to sleep, don't just lie there worrying. Get up for a few minutes and read a book or get a warm drink (no sugar or caffeine, remember!). Go back to bed when you're feeling a bit sleepier.



Don't stress it

Thinking about sleep too much or trying to force yourself to sleep will probably only keep you awake. Instead, learning how to relax both your body and mind can help you to get to sleep much more easily.



Set yourself a 'get fit' plan

Eating healthily and getting regular exercise are great ways of helping yourself sleep better. However, plan your meals and exercise to avoid working out within an hour of bedtime or eating a big meal late in the evening – doing either of these too close to your bedtime can stop you from sleeping.



Keep a sleep diary

Keeping a sleep diary to make a note of what happened in your day and what time you went to bed and got up can be useful for letting you look back and see what has and hasn't worked for you. It also helps you to see how your sleep varies from night to night, and might help you note patterns in your sleeping.



Create a sleep routine

When you're more aware of your sleep environment, you can identify what disrupts your sleep and create a routine that's easy to follow. For example, you might turn off your phone by a certain time, dim the lights and read, or wear headphones with relaxing music. Write down your routine, and keep it short and simple to maintain consistency.

Further information

Your local GP

If you continue to be concerned about the amount and quality of sleep you are having, and the effects it is having on other aspects of your life, you should speak to your GP. They will be able to help and provide further guidance and support.

Sleepio

Sleepio is an organisation dedicated to helping people sleep better, co-founded by Professor Colin Espie, Director of the University of Oxford Sleep Research Centre and a contributor to this guide. The Sleepio website includes information about various sleep problems.

Visit sleepio.com or email hello@sleepio.com

Sleepful

Sleepful is a stress management programme that uses the principles of cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBTi). This programme can help you track your sleep, manage your bedtime and monitor your progress. It is free to download and use via a mobile app.

Visit sleepful.org.uk or contact the Sleepful team by filling out this [contact form](#).

British Snoring & Sleep Apnoea Association

The British Snoring & Sleep Apnoea Association is a not-for-profit organisation dedicated to helping snorers and their bed partners improve their sleep.

Visit britishsnoring.co.uk or email info@britishsnoring.co.uk

British Sleep Society

The British Sleep Society is a charity for medical, scientific and healthcare workers dealing with sleep disorders in the UK.

Visit sleepsociety.org.uk or email admin@sleepsociety.org.uk

Be Mindful

Be Mindful makes courses in mindfulness meditation available to everyone who wants or needs them. This site provides useful information on what mindfulness is and the different mindfulness-based courses available. You can also search for mindfulness courses near you or sign up for their specially developed online course.

Visit bemindfulonline.com

For more on mindfulness and mental wellbeing, you might also find these resources helpful:

✎ Mental Health Foundation mindfulness guide

How to look after your mental health using mindfulness.
mentalhealth.org.uk/publications

✎ NHS Every Mind Matters

Offers practical advice on mindfulness and mental health.
nhs.uk/every-mind-matters

✎ Mind

Provides guidance on how mindfulness can support mental health, especially for managing anxiety, depression, and stress.
mind.org.uk

✎ Oxford Mindfulness Foundation

Shares research-based information and courses on mindfulness, including those focused on sleep and wellbeing.
oxfordmindfulness.org

Sleep diary

For guidance on tracking your sleep, please download our sleep diary.

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Useful contacts and notes

**Together, we can help everyone
have better mental health.**

We believe everyone deserves good mental health. No one living in the UK should be deprived of the opportunity for good mental health because of who they are, the community they come from or where they live.

Good quality sleep helps us cope with stress, manage our emotions and protect our overall wellbeing.

Mental Health Foundation is the UK charity focused on preventing poor mental health and building and protecting good mental health. We research, develop and campaign for new and more effective ways to support and protect people's good mental health.



**We hope you found this
booklet informative and useful.**

We rely on public donations and grant funding to continue our vital work. Please consider making a donation mentalhealth.org.uk/donate





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69 West Nile Street, Glasgow, G1 2QB

CARDIFF

Mental Health Foundation,
Suite 7, Floor 9, Brunel House,
2 Fitzalan Road, Cardiff, CF24 0EB

BELFAST

Mental Health Foundation,
5th Floor, 14 College Square North,
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