

Boost wellbeing while you sleep

Good sleep is foundational for our mental wellbeing, cognitive health, and physical health. It may feel like you are 'switching off' when you sleep, but your brain is still very active. Its cells kick into restoration and regeneration, and your memories and emotions go through important processing. Sleep allows recovery not just physically but also psychologically.

Let's look at the main reasons why we need sleep:

- Sleep impacts our cognitive performance, attention, concentration, mood and learning ability
- Poor sleep reduces our ability to manage our emotions. For example, the amygdala – a region of the brain involved in our stress response – is more reactive after a night of poor sleep
- Sleep deprivation is associated with a wide range of poorer mental health outcomes
- Poor sleep increases a range of risk factors for chronic diseases, suppresses the immune response, and reduces our impulse control

Our sleep cycles last about 90 minutes, during which we move from being awake to light sleep to deep sleep and then to dreaming (also known as REM or rapid eye movement sleep). We cycle through these stages throughout the night, with the average adult completing six cycles in a full night of rest.

What is good sleep?

Quantity

- This can vary but the average adult needs 7-9 hours per night

Quality

- While it is normal to wake a few times in the night, our brain needs uninterrupted 90-min cycles of sleep to function optimally

Consistency

- It is better to have longer sleeps most nights, rather than making up for it during the weekend

How sleep is regulated in the brain

You may have heard of the 'circadian rhythm', which is sometimes referred to as the body clock. This rhythm is regulated by internal and external factors.

Internal factors include:

- The suprachiasmatic nucleus: A region of the brain that acts as a pacemaker for our sleep and wake cycles
- Melatonin: A hormone that is essential for the sensation of 'sleep pressure' (i.e. urge to sleep) at night
- Adenosine: This neurotransmitter builds up in the brain the longer we are awake and makes us feel tired. While substances like coffee can temporarily block our brain's receptivity for adenosine, the only real cure for returning adenosine to baseline is sleep.

External factors include:

- Light: Morning light can stimulate the release of cortisol, which is needed to feel alert and energised at the start of your day. Too much artificial light in the evening however can block the production of melatonin, which is needed to feel sleepy. Try dimming the lights after sunset.
- Temperature: A drop in core body temperature before bedtime helps to prime the brain for sleep

Tips and strategies for sleep

- **Have regular sleep and wake times.** This gives our mind and body a habitual routine which helps the sleep wake cycle rhythm. Attempt to have the same routine during the week and weekends.
- **Light has a large influence on our sleep-wake cycle.** In the evening, light exposure inhibits the release of melatonin, a hormone that the brain needs to feel sleepy. At night, limit any bright lights and put your screens away two hours prior to bed. Exposing your eyes to bright natural light in the morning also helps to regulate the sleep wake cycle.
- **Consider the environment.** Ideally, the bedroom will be cool, dark, with limited noise and clutter. Having a comfortable pillow, bedding and mattress is also important. Avoid any heavy meals and physical activity before bed.
- **Avoid consuming caffeinated products after 12pm** (note: individuals may differ in sensitivity, discretion is key).
- **Manage anxiety.** Churning thoughts about the future or past will impact your ability to fall asleep and stay asleep. Avoid clock watching. Shift your focus to something else, such as gentle music, a mindfulness meditation, relaxation or breathing exercises. These assist us to detach from unhelpful thinking.
- **Seek medical advice for any underlying medical conditions** such as snoring, obstructive sleep apnoea, insomnia and restless legs.

Boosting your wellbeing now, can help you cope when the unexpected happens. Our events and resources can support you to increase wellbeing using practical, evidence-based strategies.

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