Wellbeing Service
Live Well Feel Better

Tips for

BETTER SLEEP

NHS
Borders

Sleep and sleep problems

There is no correct amount of sleep that everyone must have. Sleep is a natural process that is not directly under our control. Our bodies take what they need. In the short-term our bodies will adjust the type and quality of sleep to make sure we stay healthy.

If people think they are not sleeping enough, it can be worrying to them. In fact, research has shown that people who think they are poor sleepers and those who think they are good sleepers both sleep for about the same amount of time. So although some people may **think** they are not sleeping enough, in fact they probably **are**.

It is not possible **never** to sleep. Studies have shown that people cannot keep going without sleep. Even if people are deprived of sleep for long periods, they always fall asleep in the end!

This is not to say that worrying about lack of sleep is not a very real problem to some people. There are many different reasons for sleep problems. They might be:

- **stress, anxiety or worry**

  when we are stressed or anxious our bodies are more alert and our minds tend to be full of worrying thoughts

- **surroundings**

  noise, too much heat or cold, an uncomfortable bed, or too much light can all affect sleep patterns

- **food/drink**

  drinks with caffeine and foods that are hard to digest can cause the body to be too alert to sleep

- **medication**

  some medicines can make you feel too awake. Check with your GP if you think your poor sleep might be linked to your medication

- **getting older**

  the normal effects of ageing mean that less sleep is needed, or that people tend to doze during the day

- ***disrupted routine***   *changing shift patterns or having a baby can change sleep patterns*

- ***pain***   *some medical conditions cause chronic pain, which makes sleeping difficult*

- ***bladder problems***   *many people have to get up at night to go to the toilet*

- ***not enough exercise***   *lack of exercise can mean your body is not tired enough to need much sleep*

Worry / pain / health problems / other things → Disturbed sleep
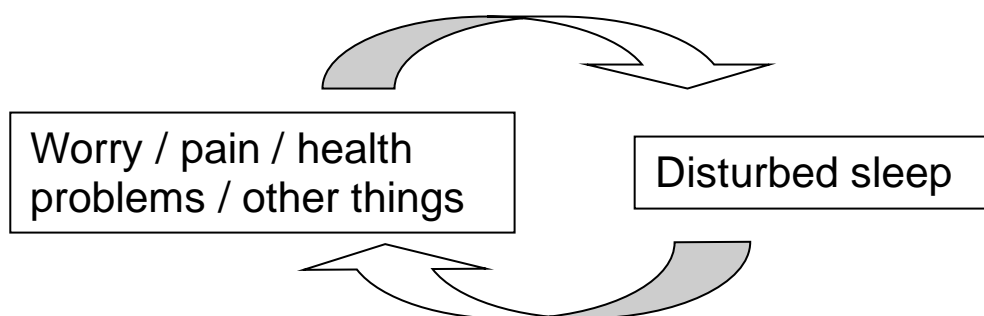
Establishing a better sleep pattern

There is no quick solution to sleep problems. You have to train yourself and your body to behave in a way that helps you have a good sleep pattern.
The best way to get a better night's sleep is to develop a good routine and stick to it. Below are some rules you should try to follow:

- Use the second half of the evening to unwind. Your mind and body need to rest before you go to bed. Set a deadline for work or activity 90 minutes before bedtime. If you usually have a racing mind and tend to worry at bedtime then try to save you worrying until a specific 'worry time' every day at the same time which is not too close to bedtime.

- Plan a bedtime that can become a regular time, about 8-9 hours before your alarm will ring the next day.

- Be careful about what you eat and drink for 2-3 hours before bedtime:

  - Avoid drinks and hot beverages which contain caffeine. These drinks can make us feel more awake and can disrupt our sleep. Some drinks which include caffeine and should be avoided close to bed are; tea, coffee, energy drinks and fizzy juice. If you enjoy a hot drink before bedtime try caffeine–free alternatives such as herbal teas (such as camomile), Horlicks and Ovaltine.

  - Try to refrain from having a heavy meal close to bedtime. When food is digested through the night it can cause discomfort and disturb our sleep. If you feel hungry close to bedtime or during the night when you wake up then have a light snack.

- Try to avoid exercise too close to bed as this can make us feel more alert and have a negative impact on our sleep. However, exercise during the day can make us feel more tired at bedtime so try and make some form of exercising part of your daily routine.

- If you are a smoker, try to cut down the amount you smoke in the evening. Nicotine is a stimulant drug which makes us feel more awake. If you struggle to stop smoking in the evening then try having a few puffs rather than a full cigarette.

- Many people believe that having a wee 'night cap' at bedtime helps them sleep. Consuming alcoholic drinks close to bedtime actually does the opposite and causes us to repeatedly wake up during the night. Try not to have alcohol within 3 hours of bedtime.

- Make sure that your bed and your bedroom environment is as relaxing and inviting as it can be. Try and avoid clutter so that have less things to pay attention to when you are going to bed to sleep. If your mattress isn't comfortable then try and invest in a new one or a mattress protector. Make sure your pillows and duvet are comfortable as well.

- Limit noise and light as far as possible when you are in your bedroom. This is because we are more likely to fall asleep and stay asleep when we are surrounded by darkness and silence. If you live near a main road it might be helpful to invest in ear plugs and black out curtains.

- Try and make sure your room is cool (not cold) and well ventilated. Research suggests that we are more likely to fall asleep and stay asleep if our bedroom is at the right temperature.

- Do not watch television, use a computer/tablet device or smart phone in your bedroom or close to bedtime. These pieces of technology emit blue light which stop us from producing melatonin (sleep hormone) so we end up feeling more awake rather than sleepy.

- If you do not fall asleep within 15 minutes, get out of bed and go to another room until you feel sleepy-tired. This is the feeling you get when your eyes feel heavy and you feel like you need to close them. It can be helpful to do something which helps you relax in this room. This could be reading a book, listening to some music or trying one of the relaxation exercises. **Repeat this step** as often as you need to as practice makes perfect with this technique.

- Avoid clock watching when you are trying to get to sleep. It is common for people to do this when they are worried about how much sleep they are going to get and how this will affect them the next day, "If I don't get to sleep soon I will only have had three hours sleep and be a zombie at work tomorrow". This worry delays us getting to sleep so it is best to try and make sure your alarm clock is out of reach or covered up to avoid the temptation to look at it. Remember it's the noise of the clock that wakes us up so there is no reason to have a peek during the night!

- Set the alarm to the **same rising time every day.** If you wake up before the alarm, try to lie quietly and enjoy the comfortable feeling of being in bed until you need to get up.

- **Avoid napping through the day** to make sure you are tired at bedtime. If you have to nap then make sure it is between 20-30 minutes as research shows this napping time should give you the boost of energy that you need.

- **Do not take extra sleep** to make up for a previous bad night's sleep. You are trying to retrain your body to a new routine, so keep to your new programme.

- Stick to the programme for **several weeks** in order to set up a regular pattern.

What to do when you first get into bed

- Do not try too hard to fall asleep.

- Tell yourself that 'sleep will come when it is ready', that 'relaxing in bed is almost as good'.

- Try to keep your eyes open in the darkened room and, as they (naturally) try to close, tell yourself to 'resist that for another few seconds'. This approach 'tempts' sleep to take over.

- Visualise a pleasing scene or try repeating a neutral word (such as 'the') to yourself every few seconds if you start having a racing mind.

Developing relaxation skills

If you start to become anxious about not sleeping, controlling your breathing can be a very good way to make you feel calmer.

Breathing Exercises

- STEP 1: **breathe in through your nose** for the count of four seconds' one elephant, 2 elephant, 3 elephant, 4 elephant'

- STEP 2: **hold your breath** for the count of two seconds

- STEP 3: **Breathe out** through your mouth for the count of six seconds

Repeat these three steps until you begin to feel calm.

Don't take too many deep breaths in a row or breathe too quickly, or you will become dizzy. Take a few ordinary breaths in between the deep ones.

It can be common for this to feel difficult at first so it might be helpful to try reducing your breathing in and breathing out times by 1- 2 seconds which may make it a more comfortable pace for you.

Worries

Clean Your Head – Ready For Bed

The commonest reason people give for not sleeping is that they lie in bed worrying. One way of dealing with worrying thoughts is to plan your days ahead. Hold a daily planning session, which you use to work through your worries and problems.

This series of self-help materials includes a booklet on worry.

Planning sessions

Hold a daily planning session, which you use to work through your worries and problems.

- Planning sessions
    - Set aside 10-15 minutes.
    - Sit in a quiet room. Have pencil and notebook to hand.
    - Notice what kind of worries you have and make a note of them.
    - Worry time is a space to collect your worries, not to solve them. After worry time you may have ideas on how to solve them.

Prioritising Worries

- Prioritise your real worries
    - Not important
    - Important and leave for now
    - Important and problem solve

Problem Solving

- Problem solve

Further Information

NHS Inform

[Sleep problems and insomnia self-help guide | NHS inform](#)