



Tips for

Better Sleep



## Sleep and sleep problems

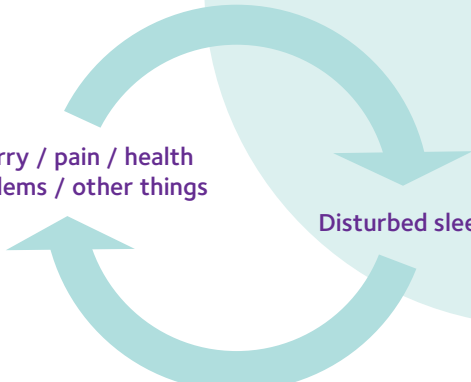
There is no correct amount of sleep that everyone must have. Sleep is a natural process that is not directly under our control. Our bodies take what they need. In the short-term our bodies will adjust the type and quality of sleep to make sure we stay healthy.

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.
- **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.
- Plan a bedtime that can become a regular time, about 8 hours before your alarm will ring the next day.
- Be careful about what you eat and drink for 2–3 hours before bedtime:
  - Avoid coffee, tea, hot chocolate, cola, energy drinks or alcohol, as all these can upset your sleep.
  - Try caffeine-free drinks: herbal teas (such as camomile),

- Horlicks and Ovaltine are soothing before bedtime.
- Some foods cause the digestive system to work hard, so try to avoid late night snacks of heavy foods such as cheese, curry or meat.
- If you are a smoker, try to cut down the amount you smoke in the evening.
- Put the **light out** as soon as you are in bed.
- Do not watch television in bed. If you want to watch TV late at night, sit in a chair to do this.
- If you do not fall asleep within about 1/2 hour, get out of bed and relax in another room until you feel tired again. **Repeat this step** as often as you need to.
- 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.
- **Do not nap** during the day.
- **Do not take extra sleep** to make up for a previous bad night. 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.
- Try counting backwards from 99. If you get lost, start again. (It's better than counting sheep!)
- Visualise a pleasing scene or try repeating a neutral word (such as 'the') to yourself every few seconds.

## 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 out**
- **STEP 2: breathe in slowly** to the count of four, 'one elephant, 2 elephant, 3 elephant, 4 elephant'
- **STEP 3: hold** your breath for a count of four
- **STEP 4: breathe out slowly** while counting elephants

Repeat these four 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.

**Learn to relax:** The Stress and Anxiety booklet in the series describes how to use relaxation.

## 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

- Set aside 20 minutes in the early evening, after your meal.
- Sit in a quiet room. Have pencil and notebook to hand.
- Think about how the day has gone. Write down the things you achieved.
- Think about problem areas and anything you haven't finished. Write down the way you intend to tackle each of these and when you will do so. **Do not do anything about them at this time.**
- If these matters are on your mind when you are in bed, put them off until daytime. Remind yourself that you have already written down a plan for the worry.
- If it is a **new** worry/problem and you cannot stop thinking about it, **get out of bed**, and add it to your planning list. Remind yourself that bed is not the place to think about such things and that you can do no more. The problem is on your list and you will look at it closely the following day.

## Things to avoid

- Drinks with caffeine
- Heavy food
- Too much activity too near bedtime
- Watching TV in bed



## Further Help

### Books

Some useful books you may like to buy or borrow from the library. In some areas your GP can prescribe one or more of these books for you to get from your local library.

Butler, G and Hope, T (2002) *Manage Your Mind*. 2nd edition. Oxford University Press (Chapter 11: Learning to Relax; Chapter 16: Getting the Better of Anxiety and Worry; Chapter 30: Overcoming Sleep Problems)  
ISBN: 9780198527725.

Brewer, Sarah (2002) *Simply Relax: The Beginner's Guide to Relaxation*. Duncan Baird.  
ISBN: 1900131293.

Wilson, Paul (1999) *Little Book of Calm*. Penguin.  
ISBN: 0140285261.

Worwood, Valerie Ann (1997) *The Fragrant Mind*. Bantam.  
ISBN: 0553407996. (An easy read on aromatherapy.)

Worwood, Valerie Ann (1991) *The Fragrant Pharmacy*. Bantam  
ISBN: 0553403974. (An easy read. Complete guide to aromatherapy.)

## Websites

**[www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org)** (An American site providing information about sleep difficulties).

**[www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)** (For fact sheets and mental health information).

**[www.edspace.org.uk](http://www.edspace.org.uk)** (Provides useful information about resources in Edinburgh).

**[www.eastlothian.gov.uk/documents/contentmanage/directory](http://www.eastlothian.gov.uk/documents/contentmanage/directory)** (A very useful directory of national and local East Lothian services).

## Helplines and Other Services

**Breathing Space** – A mental health helpline – Tel: 0800 83 85 87 (Daily, 6pm–2am).

**NHS 24** – Tel: 08454 24 24 24

Advice and information about how to look after yourself and treat common health problems (24 hours).

**Midlothian: Orchard Centre Services** – Health in Mind.

Tel: 0131 663 1616 (Mon – Fri 9.30am–5pm, except Tues 12.30pm–5pm). Offers a wide range of information, support and activities for people with mental health problems.

### **East Lothian: CHANGES Community Health Project**

Tel: 0131 653 3977 or 3813. Web: [www.changeschp.org.uk](http://www.changeschp.org.uk).

– Promotes positive wellbeing, providing a resource base and information about support for people experiencing stress, depression, panic attacks, phobias and anxiety. Different types of service available, e.g. various free short courses such as ‘understanding anger’ and self help groups.

*S Black, R Donald, M Henderson  
2005, NHS Borders*

*Acknowledgement to Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Trust and Doing Well Service, NHS Borders. Developed with assistance from The National Programme for Improving Mental Health and Well Being, 2008.  
Version 1*



Lothian – Psychological Interventions Network

