

# S l e e p E a s y

improving the length and quality of your sleep



Everyone likes to have a good night's sleep, but not everyone sleeps well all the time. They may have difficulty getting to sleep or staying asleep or may not feel refreshed in the morning. Having problems sleeping on a regular basis is called insomnia. It's not a disease and very rarely does any harm but if it is affecting your life or making you feel distressed there are things you can do about it. This info-sheet gives you some information about sleep, sleeping problems, and some strategies for helping yourself.

## ***What is a 'normal' sleep?***

The amount of sleep people need to feel refreshed during the day varies from person to person. Some people need as little as 4 to 5 hours, while others need much more. There is no 'right' amount of sleep that you 'have to have'.

Remember, *your body must sleep, and it will make you sleep when it needs to do so.* Sleeplessness is usually a result of external factors, or *your own worry*, preventing your body from doing what it would otherwise normally do.

## ***Do I have a sleeping problem?***

You may be considered to have a problem if you are experiencing:

- Difficulty getting to sleep
- Restless or non-refreshing sleep
- Waking frequently during the night or very early in the morning
- Not being able to get back to sleep once you wake up during the night
- Feeling tired during the day

The most important thing to remember is that sleeping problems may make you tired the next day, *but they will not harm you.*

## ***What causes sleeping problems?***

Worrying about not sleeping or the day-time effects of poor sleep is probably the most powerful cause of sleeping difficulties. However, our sleep is affected by many things – circumstances, what our body is doing, and how we are thinking and feeling.

**Table 1**

*Tick the things that may be contributing to your sleep problems.*

- An illness, or being in physical pain
- Sleep apnoea (a condition where a person stops breathing for short periods when sleeping)
- Stressful lifestyle, being worried about things
- Boredom, loneliness, unhappiness and depression
- Taking quarrels or problems to bed
- Napping or sleeping during the day
- Not exercising
- Sleeping in an airless, noisy or overheated room
- Going to bed with an empty or full stomach
- Being over-stimulated from late exercise, TV and radio, stimulants such as caffeine (tea, coffee, chocolate, cola drinks) and tobacco
- Changing workshifts or time zones (jet lag)
- Needing to pass urine during the night, eg men with prostate disease
- Taking certain medications: certain cough and cold products, or *use of sedatives or sleeping tablets for over 4 weeks*. Ask a pharmacist about these drugs.

**Remember:**

- Your sleep needs may change over time, especially as you get older.
- Learn to manage stress.
- If you nap during the day, accept that you *will* need less sleep during the night.
- Get fit. Try to do enough exercise to feel tired at night, but avoid arousing your body with exercise in the hours before bed (sex is an exception). Ideally, experts recommend 30 minutes of rigorous cardio-vascular exercise (eg jogging, swimming, cycling) three times a week.
- Avoid caffeine within 2-3 hours of bedtime. Allow yourself no more than two full-strength coffees per day.
- Avoid alcohol within 2-3 hours of bedtime. Alcohol is a sedative, but you should not use it to help you get to sleep because your body may become reliant on using it. Also, it may cause you to wake during the night and can ruin the quality of your sleep.
- Stop smoking. In the meantime, avoid having a cigarette for at least an hour before bed.
- A light snack before bed may be sleep inducing, but a heavy meal too close to bedtime interferes with sleep.
- Sleep in a dark, quiet room with plenty of fresh air – cover unavoidable noises with music or a fan.
- Keep the bedroom for sleeping and sex – NOT for watching TV, reading or doing work.
- Use a firm, flat mattress and a pillow that is not too high.
- Start going to bed at the same time each night and get up at the same time each day. This is part of training your body into a regular sleep cycle.

**Before bed:**

- Try relaxing in a warm bath.
- Try having some warm milk and a light snack.
- Try listening to peaceful music and/or read for a while. Do this *outside the bedroom*.
- Slow down your breathing and make it deeper. Breathe in for 3 seconds and out for 3 seconds. Try doing this as part of a relaxation exercise or meditation.
- Most importantly, *try to do the same routine every night*. Develop a short routine involving things like having a bath, washing your face and cleaning teeth. A hot bath may also be more helpful than a shower because a bath may be less stimulating.

***If you can't sleep***

If you have been awake in bed for over *15 minutes*, either at bedtime or during the night:

1. Get up, *leave the bedroom*.
2. Do something:
  - Try walking around for a while.
  - Jot down anything that has been on your mind and decide to deal with it in the morning.
  - Have a warm, non-caffeinated, non-alcoholic drink.
  - Read, watch TV or do something else passive (that doesn't require much thought).
3. *Only go back to bed when you are feeling drowsy*. This may mean you may be up for a while.

***Should I use medications?***

- Your doctor or pharmacist can suggest medications to help you sleep. *These are best used as a short term (couple of weeks) solution.*
- If used for too long, some sleep medicines can cause problems such as dependence, drowsiness in the daytime, confusion and unsteadiness and, paradoxically, sleep disturbance.
- *Aim for the lowest dose for the shortest possible time.*