

A guide to getting a good night's sleep

There is a close relationship between sleep and mental health. Living with a mental health problem can affect how well you sleep, and poor sleep can have a negative impact on your mental health.

Try our Quick Read (if you are in a hurry) or Detailed Read (if you have more time) for more information about sleeping well.

Not everything on this page will work for you, but you will find some suggestions that you could try. And if something does not work now, you can always try it again another time.

If you are struggling to cope, we highly recommend that you seek professional advice. Please do not suffer in silence.

Quick read

Got a few minutes? Find out what you can do to improve your sleep. If poor sleep is affecting your health or day to day life, see your doctor or health practitioner and ask about treatment and support. Here are 6 things you can try to help you drift off

- Follow a routine at bedtime, for example, going to bed and waking up at around the same time every day. Or you could try going to bed only once you feel ready to sleep, but still get up at the same time.
- Relax before trying to sleep. There are lots of ways to do this, and plenty of apps to help you with meditation, visualization and breathing practice – all of which can help you unwind.
- Not sure what is keeping you awake? Try writing a sleep diary for two weeks. Make a note of when you went to bed, how many hours you slept, how many times you woke and how long for, what you ate and drank the day before and what your mood was. Keeping a log can help you work out what is affecting your sleep and you can take the diary to your doctor if you seek their help.
- Make sure your sleeping area is comfortable. Small changes to temperature, light and sound levels can really help.
- Switch off! It can be helpful to avoid screens in the hour or two before sleep. If you can, use the night mode on your devices to reduce the amount of blue light you are exposed to.
- Look after yourself. Physical exercise, a balanced diet and time spent outdoors can help you sleep better. Avoid stimulants such as caffeine and sugar before you go to bed.

Detailed read

What problems might I have with sleep?

Everyone needs sleep, but many of us have problems with it. You might recognize some of the experiences listed below, or, have other difficulties with sleep that aren't mentioned here.

You might:

- find it hard to fall asleep, stay asleep or wake up earlier than you would like to
- have problems that disturb your sleep, such as panic attacks, flashbacks, nightmares or psychosis
- find it hard to wake up or get out of bed
- often feel tired or sleepy – this could be because you are not sleeping enough, not getting good quality sleep or because of health problems
- sleep a lot – which could include sleeping at times when you want, or need, to be awake.

If you are having problems sleeping, you might:

- feel lonely or isolated – for example, if you do not have the energy to see people or they do not seem to understand
- struggle to concentrate, or make plans and decisions
- feel irritable or not have energy to do things
- have problems with day to day life – for example, at work or with family and friends
- be more affected by other health problems, including mental health problems
- be more likely to feel anxious or depressed
- be more likely to have psychotic episodes – poor sleep can trigger mania, psychosis or paranoia, or make existing symptoms worse.

What causes problems with sleep?

The things that affect our sleep differ for everyone. They can include:

- stresses or worries – for example, issues with money, housing or work
- problems with where you sleep – for example, if you sleep somewhere uncomfortable or you are easily disturbed
- health conditions relating to sleep, also known as sleep disorders
- being a parent or career where sleep may be interrupted?
- taking medication, including starting or coming off medication
- recreational drugs and alcohol

- working at night or being a shift worker
- current or past trauma
- mental and physical health problems, many of which can affect your sleep.

If problems with sleep are worrying you or affecting your day to day life, it is a good idea to see a doctor who can give you a health check and help you access treatment and support. If you fill in a sleep diary, you could take this to your appointment to show your doctor.

How can I improve my sleep?

This page has some tips and suggestions for improving your sleep. Some people find these ideas useful but, remember that different things work for different people at different times.

Only try what you feel comfortable with and try not to put too much pressure on yourself. If something is not working for you (or does not feel possible just now), you can try something else, or come back to it another time.

Try to establish a routine

It could help to establish a regular sleeping routine or habits. You might need to try different things before you find what works for you.

You could try going to bed and waking up at around the same time every day. Or it might help to go to bed only once you feel ready to sleep, but still get up around the same time.

Relax before you try to sleep

You may find a relaxation routine can help you prepare for sleep. These are some ideas you could try.

Do something calming

For example, this could be listening to relaxing music or having a bath.

Breathing exercises

There are many organizations with great ideas and example exercises

Muscle relaxation

Consciously tense and relax your muscles, one after the other, starting with your toes and working up your body until you reach the top of your head.

Visualization

Picture a scene or landscape that has pleasant memories for you, or that you imagine would be a calming or peaceful place to be.

Meditation

Some people find it helps to try meditation techniques, like mindfulness. You could learn these at a class or from self-help guides.

Fill in a sleep diary

You may find it difficult to work out what's affecting your sleep. A sleep diary involves recording information about your sleep habits to help you understand your sleep problem and what's affecting it.

If you want to, you can show your sleep diary to healthcare professionals to help explain what problems you are having. For example, you could take it with you to a doctor's appointment.

A sleep diary could include information about:

- what time you go to bed and what time you get up
- total number of hours of sleep, or a rough idea if you are not sure
- overall quality of sleep, ranked 1–5
- how many times you wake up in the night, how long you are awake and what you do while you are awake
- whether you have nightmares, night terrors or sleep paralysis, or have sleepwalked during the night
- whether you sleep during the day and for how long
- any medication you are taking, including the dose and what time you take it
- the amount of caffeine, alcohol or nicotine you have
- the amount of physical activity you do
- what you eat and drink
- your general feelings and moods, including any anxious or repetitive

thoughts. You should keep your sleep diary for at least two weeks.

Try to make your sleeping area more comfortable

You might not have much control over where you sleep – for example, if you are staying in hospital or temporary accommodation. But there might still be small changes you can make or ask someone to help you with.

For example:

- Try different temperature, light and noise levels to see what works for you.
- Lots of people find dark, quiet and cool environments best, but everyone is different.
- If you can not sleep in darkness, try keeping a light or bedside lamp switched on.
- If silence makes it harder to sleep, listen to music, nature sounds, a podcast or the radio.
- You might find it helpful to try different bedding – for example, a warmer or cooler duvet or bedding, or a different pillow.

Think about screens and device settings

Using screens in the evening, including on tablets and mobile phones, can negatively affect your sleep.

It can help to think about when and how you use screens. For example, you could try:

- avoiding screens an hour or two before bed
- cutting down on screen time before you try to sleep
- avoiding stimulating activities, such as playing games
- using a blue light filter, night mode or dark mode – you might be able to find these options in your device settings and in individual app settings
- adjusting other settings – for example, changing the brightness, or using silent, flight or airplane, or do not disturb mode.

Look after yourself

Looking after yourself physically can help improve your sleep. Try these to see if they help.

Think about your diet

Some types of foods can affect your sleep, including caffeine and sugar. It can also help to avoid eating large meals right before going to bed.

Try to do some physical activity

Physical activity can help you sleep, including gentle physical activity. It can be particularly helpful to be active outdoors. Some people find they need to stop any physical activity a few hours before going to sleep.

Spend time outside

Being outside in green space can help you relax and improve your wellbeing. Spending time in natural light can also be helpful for your sleep.

