

Sleep Disturbances

Most people do not get enough sleep, often due to lack of time. Other people lack sufficient rest because they have difficulty falling or staying asleep.

People who experience sleep disturbances over an extended period may have a clinical sleep disorder. Sleep problems can also be a symptom of depression or another mental health condition.

Why People Need Sleep

The right amount of sleep is essential for the mind and body to function correctly. Sleep gives the brain, muscles, organs, and different body systems a much-needed break.

Sleep helps the body replenish strength, bolster the immune system, and recover from illness and injury. It also provides a mental hiatus, a distraction for the mind from the complex cognitive and emotional processing that occurs during the day.

The need for sleep differs from person to person, but experts recommend eight hours of sleep for adults every night and more for children. Sleep loss can interfere with the ability to perform tasks involving memory, logical reasoning, learning, and mathematical calculations.

Research shows that people who suffer from severe lack of sleep are also more likely than others to develop many kinds of psychiatric problems.

Causes of Sleep Disturbances

Many factors can contribute to sleep problems, including:

- **Stress:** Experts pick stress as the leading cause of short-term sleeping difficulties. Worries related to work, school, marriage, relationships, and recent life events can interfere with a person's ability to fall or remain asleep or achieve a restful state of healthy sleep
- **Depression:** People who suffer from clinical or short-term depression can have difficulty sleeping. Others with these conditions sleep too much.
- **Lifestyle choices:** Many substances we ingest and activities we participate in can significantly affect our sleep. Stressful life events or situations and disruptions in our natural body clock (e.g., working the night shift) can contribute to sleep disturbances, as can exercise routines if done shortly before bed. Sleep can also be impacted by drinking caffeine or alcohol, taking certain prescription or illicit drugs, or smoking.

- **Physical problems:** A medical condition or illness, especially one accompanied by chronic pain, can make it difficult to sleep well. Hormonal changes can also contribute to the problem.
- **Medications:** Certain prescribed drugs, such as high blood pressure medication, can sometimes cause sleeplessness.
- **Sleep disorders:** There are dozens of medically recognized clinical sleep disorders that can cause sleeping difficulties. However, 95 percent of people with sleep disorders remain undiagnosed. Common sleep disorders include:
 - Insomnia (inability to fall or stay asleep)
 - Sleep apnea (inadequate respiration during sleep)
 - Narcolepsy (tendency to fall asleep rapidly at inappropriate times)
 - Restless leg syndrome
 - Parasomnias (e.g., sleepwalking, nightmares, night terrors, sleep inertia, etc.)
 - Chronic fatigue syndrome (feeling very tired most of the time).

Ways to Cope

People who experience sleep disturbances over an extended period should acknowledge the problem and seek help.

Chronic lack of sleep can be dangerous and detrimental to physical and mental health. It is estimated that accidents caused by dozing drivers kill as many as those who drive under the influence of alcohol. Talk to a doctor about symptoms, and explore different treatment options.

There may also be underlying emotional reasons for lack of sleep, such as a long-standing conflict, marital problems, or job stress. It may be best to talk to a therapist or counselor about the problem in these cases.

Tips for getting a proper amount of sleep include:

- Get up about the same time every day.
- Go to bed only when tired. If you cannot fall asleep within 20 minutes, get up and do something relaxing.
- Establish relaxing pre-sleep rituals, such as a warm bath, a light bedtime snack or 10 minutes of reading.
- Do not go to bed on an empty or too-full stomach.
- Exercise regularly at least six hours before bedtime. Mild exercise, such as simple stretching or walking, should not be done closer than four hours before bedtime.
- Maintain a regular schedule. Setting regular times for meals, medications, chores and other activities helps keep the "inner clock" running smoothly.
- Do not eat or drink anything containing caffeine within six hours before bedtime.
- Do not drink alcohol within several hours of bedtime. Tiredness can intensify the effects of alcohol.
- Avoid smoking close to bedtime.
- If you take naps, try to do so at the same time every day and for shorter than one hour's time. For most people, a mid-afternoon nap is most helpful.

- Avoid sleeping pills, or use them conservatively. Most doctors avoid prescribing sleeping pills for a period of longer than three weeks. Never drink alcohol while taking sleeping pills.
- Avoid bright lights or "blue light" from screens before bedtime. Excessive illumination and light from phones, tablets, or laptops trick the body into believing it is time to be awake.
- Avoid watching TV or doing paperwork; let your bed be a place of rest.
- Try taking a hot bath 90 minutes before bedtime. This raises body temperature initially. The subsequent drop in body temp makes a person sleepy.

Resources

- American Academy of Sleep Medicine: www.aasmnet.org
- American Sleep Apnea Association: www.sleepapnea.org
- Better Sleep Council: www.bettersleep.org
- Narcolepsy Network: www.narcolepsynetwork.org
- National Sleep Foundation: www.sleepfoundation.org

Here when you need us.

Call: 844-207-5465

Online: guidanceresources.com

App: GuidanceNowSM

Web ID: LivingME

©2026 ComPsych[®] Corporation. All rights reserved. This information is for educational purposes only. It is always important to consult with the appropriate professional on financial, medical, legal, behavioral or other issues. As you read this information, it is your responsibility to make sure that the facts and ideas apply to your situation.