



Sleep

DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Advice for Children, Young People & Adults



Psychology and Therapeutic Services
Suffolk County Council

*Our sincere thanks to **Alexander Haswell***

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The reason for this guidance

During the coronavirus pandemic, many people right across the world have found their sleep patterns have been disrupted due to stress, worry, and no longer going out to school or work.

Such a disruption can especially impact children and adults who are sensitive to changes in routine. If your usual sleep patterns have gone off-course during the pandemic, be reassured that you are not alone in this.

The following is guidance on how to promote good sleep habits during the pandemic, and beyond. The strategies here have been shown to be beneficial, and it is far more helpful to try and create conditions for good rest and sleep with acceptance, than to try and force sleep. Everyone is different and so it is important to do your best to follow good guidance and be gentle to yourself.



Why is sleep so important?

Sleep affects every part of us: our energy, health, emotional and physical balance, learning, memory, motivation and attention...to name but a few. When we are sleeping our body is building, fixing and repairing: preparing us to be fit and ready for another day.



During sleep, our immune system releases proteins that help to fight infections and inflammation and help us respond to stress. However, when we do not get enough sleep or our sleep is disrupted, our bodies produce fewer of these important proteins and we can more easily become unwell. Lack of sleep can also affect how quickly we recover if we do become unwell.

Good quality sleep also helps promote good emotional and mental health. It helps us to face difficulties without being on an emotional seesaw, but instead to be calmer, more balanced and see a way through. Poor sleep is linked to mental health difficulties such as anxiety and depression.

Sleep is vitally important in terms of learning. During sleep, the brain sorts out and stores important information - this is how memories are created. Adults and children who experience inadequate sleep are more likely to have problems paying attention, forgetting things and keeping up with work.

“When sleep is abundant...minds flourish”

How much sleep do we need?

We spend up to one-third of our lives asleep. Sleep is a vital indicator of overall health and well-being.

Although research cannot pinpoint a precise amount of sleep needed by people at different ages, there are "rule-of-thumb" amounts experts agree upon:



- ✦ *Newborns (0-3 months) need 14-17 hours sleep.*
- ✦ *Infants (4-11 months) need 12-15 hours sleep.*
- ✦ *Toddlers (1-2 years) need 11-14 hours sleep.*
- ✦ *Preschoolers (3-5 years) need 10-13 hours of sleep.*
- ✦ *School-age children (6-13 years) need 9-11 hours sleep.*
- ✦ *Teenagers (14-17 years old) need 8-10 hours sleep.*
- ✦ *Adults need 7-9 hours sleep.*

One way to find the optimum bedtime is to work backwards. Start with the time you will need to be awake in the morning. From here, use the recommended hours to find your new sleep schedule.

Remember, everyone is different and if you know you need more or perhaps slightly less sleep, adjust the hours accordingly.

Try <https://www.sleepjunkie.org/sleep-calculator/>

Routine

Routine is the most important factor in getting a good night sleep. “*Routine is the guardian of good sleep. It protects our sleep.*” - Kevin Morgan, Professor of Psychology, Loughborough University.



During this current time, try as much as possible to preserve your sleep pattern for you and your family. Ideally, you should have the same sleep / wake time **seven days a week**. If you do wish to go to bed later on weekends, try and and move your sleep / wake times by *no more than an hour*- i.e. go to sleep no more one hour than you usually would, and get up no more than one hour than you usually would.

For children, establish and maintain a bedtime routine each evening that is short and predictable. Start the routine 15-30 minutes before the set bedtime. The routine should take place in the child s bedroom where it is quiet (other than bathing / teeth-brushing activities, etc).

Light

Right now we can't go outside as much as we used to. Our eyes need exposure to outdoor light because of a hormone in our body called *melatonin* which regulates our sleep and wake pattern. Staying indoors for a long time can reduce our melatonin levels, and simultaneously increase our use of artificial lighting, which will then disrupt our sleep.



When you wake up in the morning, open the blinds or curtains straightaway and make sure lots of natural light is getting into your home. Stand by an open window, or if you have a balcony or garden try and use this space to get exposure to natural light. If you do go out to exercise, try not to use sunglasses. Getting exposure to natural light will improve the quality of your sleep and your mood.

At night, the bedroom should be comfortable, quiet, and dark. Make sure you are closing the curtains or blinds. Some children may benefit from black out blinds, children's ear plugs and a soft eye mask to block out sound and light during the night.

Screens

Research suggests that the *blue light* emitted from screens suppresses *melatonin*, an important hormone which helps our bodies to know when it is time to fall asleep. Leaving screens on means that our brains do not receive the signal to go to sleep. Try and keep bedrooms screen-free zones. Make sure you turn off all screens (television, phones, tablets, etc.) ***at least one hour before bedtime.***



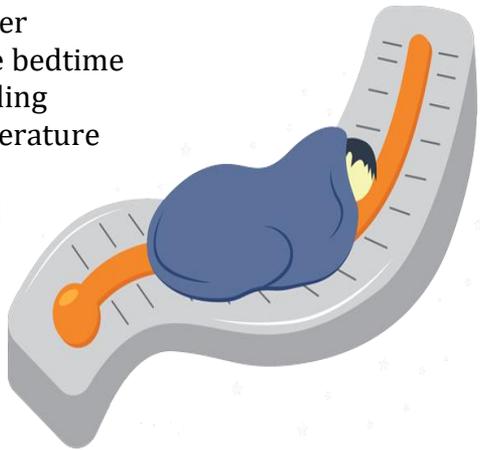
Try and engage in calming and soothing activities before bed that prepare the body and mind for sleep. Help yourself and your child to ‘wind down’ before bed by reading a book together, doing stretching exercises, or listening to gentle music, for example.

Environment

If you are able to, reserve bedrooms strictly for sleep so that you and your children associate these with falling asleep. Avoid doing work or watching television in bedrooms if you can. Doing nothing in bed but sleep strengthens this association.

Try to consider what is visible during the night: clocks might make you anxious, posters might be scary or toys could be tempting to play with. Perhaps covering or putting away some things would be more relaxing? If you don't like total darkness, choose a night light with a very soft glow that can be left on.

Having a warm bath or shower around thirty minutes before bedtime helps cue our bodies into feeling sleepy. A cool-down in temperature signals to the brain that it is time to get ready for bed and kickstarts melatonin production, the hormone responsible for regulating our sleep. Set the temperature at night to remain somewhere in the range of 15-19°C degrees.



Maintaining a consistently cool bedroom temperature is essential for facilitating the body's natural cooling process and ensuring an uninterrupted night of restful sleep.

Diet and Exercise

Exercise during the day helps you sleep better at night and also boosts the immune system. Children and adults who exercise find it easier to fall asleep at night and have deeper sleep. Make sure the time for exercise is earlier in the day, as stimulating exercise close to bedtime may make it harder to fall asleep.



In terms of diet, if adults or children consume caffeinated foods or drinks (e.g., chocolate, coffee, tea, fizzy drinks) in the afternoon or evening, they will also interfere with sleep, so limit these and have no caffeine after midday.

Limit drink intake of any kind before bed, to avoid having to get up in the night time to go to the toilet.

Our eating times also affect sleep. If we eat a big meal our bodies have to divert energy towards digestion, and it is a signal to stay awake. So, try and eat the last meal of the day earlier, and remember that a heavy meal will make it harder to sleep.

Stress

This is currently a very stressful and worrying time for adults and children - it is natural to feel this way.



Stress and worry can affect the quality of our sleep. It is therefore important to acknowledge these anxieties and remember that these feelings are normal.

The use of a *worry jar* may help anyone with these anxieties - this is where a person of any age can write any thoughts or worries they have on notes, which can then be placed in a special jar. Keep the choice as to whether the writer wants to discuss them or keep them to themselves. If it helps them to share, then these can then be discussed with a trusted person. If this is with a child, consider limiting to an agreed time each day, and for a set amount of time.



Contact our service



The Psychology & Therapeutic Service (P&TS) is available for advice, guidance and support:

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