

SLEEP AND AGEING

If you are over 60 it will come as no surprise to hear that sleep changes as we age. Nearly a third of our life is spent asleep. Infants spend most of the day asleep. Through youth and young adulthood, the pattern of sleep that we have come to accept as "normal" or "good" develops. As we grow older sleep becomes lighter and more interrupted and other factors may impact on our ability to get that "good" night's sleep. These changes are all part of the aging process and are normal. However, poor sleep may impact on our ability to undertake and enjoy daytime activities. Importantly, there are strategies you can use to improve your sleep.

HOW DOES SLEEP CHANGE AS WE GROW OLDER?

There are two important phases of sleep that make up a normal night's sleep; non-rapid eye movement (NREM) sleep which includes light sleep and deep sleep (or slow wave sleep); and REM (rapid eye movement) sleep which is often associated with dreaming. From young adulthood to old age there is a steady decline in the amount of deep slow wave sleep and increases in light sleep although the amount of REM sleep remains much the same. It may surprise you to know that in adulthood the total amount of sleep remains the same or is slightly increased. How you feel about your sleep, is often determined by the number of awakenings you experience during sleep which increases as you age.

WHAT IS "NORMAL" SLEEP IN THE OLDER ADULTS?

Although there is no simple answer to this, most people sleep between 7 and 9 hours each day. In older adults, this sleep may not all occur at night. The afternoon nap that becomes possible when you retire and the after-dinner snooze in front of the television also contribute to your total sleep need for the day. One study found that around 40% of older



individuals (>65 years) take at least one nap a day. Most naps tend to be 30 minutes or longer and at age 80 lengthen to 60 minutes. If you do nap, you are likely to sleep less than 8 hours each night.

IT IS NOT UNUSUAL TO TAKE SOME TIME TO FALL ASLEEP

One third of women and one sixth of men report taking longer than 30 minutes to fall asleep. This may be for medical or psychological reasons, or just simply that you may be going to bed when you think you should, but your body isn't ready. Research has shown that as we grow older the body secretes less of a sleep promoting substance called melatonin. As a result the urge to sleep that is controlled by melatonin is released is not so strong in older adults. If you have continuing concerns about your sleep patterns you can speak with your local doctor.

IT IS USUAL TO WAKE UP DURING THE NIGHT

Sleep becomes more shallow, fragmented and variable in duration with age. The lighter sleep pattern means you more likely to get woken by the neighbour's dog or the passing traffic. The ageing bladder can also contribute a couple of awakenings each night. In women hot flushes of menopause may also occur at night and cause awakenings.

PERSISTENT TROUBLE FALLING ASLEEP AT NIGHT OR FEELING SLEEPY IN THE DAY IS NOT A NORMAL RESULT OF AGEING.

MEDICAL CONDITIONS THAT ARE MORE COMMON IN THE ELDERLY MAY AFFECT SLEEP

Some of the conditions that have been shown to impact on sleep include arthritis, osteoporosis, Parkinson's disease, incontinence, indigestion, heart disease and lung disease such as asthma or emphysema. For example, a survey found that 60% of arthritis sufferers over 50 years of age experience night-time pain and on average lost 2 hours sleep 10 times per month. If you suffer from any medical conditions that are affecting your sleep it is important that you tell your doctor as it may be possible to give you more relief including variations in your current medications.

DEMENTIA, INCLUDING ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE, WILL IMPACT ON SLEEP

Older adults living with dementia may have significantly disrupted sleep as a result of their dementia. This in turn often can affect their **caregiver's sleep as well. In fact, many caregivers** cite sleep disturbances, including night wandering and confusion, as the reason for placement of their loved ones in aged-care facilities. Unfortunately, two-thirds of those in long-term care facilities experience sleeping problems. Inactivity during the day and some medications may make night-time problems worse for older adults living with dementia.

SLEEP DISORDERS ARE MORE COMMON IN THE ELDERLY

Sleep apnea and periodic limb movement disorder are common in the elderly, affecting up to 25% of people to some extent. Often the partner is affected as much as the person with the condition. You may be blissfully unaware of any problems during the night, but both of these conditions may have a significant impact on your sleep, cause frequent arousals and result in daytime tiredness and other ill health. These conditions are discussed in other fact sheets.

INSOMNIA CAN BE TREATED.

In adults over 65 years 35-40% will report some problem sleeping, with 10% having persistent or chronic insomnia (difficulty sleeping). Long-term insomnia may also be a symptom of another

problem such as stress, depression or other medical conditions. Insomnia can be as high as 70% when untreated depression is also present. Discussing your problem with your doctor needs to be the first treatment approach.

SLEEPING TABLETS

Insomnia that lasts for only a few days may result from some life stresses such as family issues and sleeping tablets may have a role to get through a difficult period. However, sleeping tablets may become less effective over time and should not be prescribed for long periods of time as individuals lose their confidence around their sleep. It is not a good idea to suddenly stop taking your sleeping tablets. You will need to slowly reduce your sleeping medication and work with your doctor on the best way to do this.

SIMPLE LIFESTYLE HABITS CAN IMPROVE YOUR SLEEP

Young and old alike can benefit from following some simple guidelines about getting a good night's sleep. These rules are often called sleep hygiene. For the elderly, in particular, following some of these suggestions may help.

- **Regular Getting up Time - Giving yourself the opportunity to sleep** is the most important aid to a good night's sleep. Go to bed when you are sleepy-tired not just tired. Set the alarm clock to wake at about the same time every morning. Don't sleep in because you have had a poor night's sleep. If you wake early consider getting out of bed and starting your day and doing something that you do not normally have time to do and see if you can then make the most of the day ahead.
- **Daytime Naps** - Naps should not be used as a substitute for poor sleep at night. Some people find they sleep better after an afternoon nap, less pressure on you around your sleep. However, if your night-time sleep is disrupted, consider not napping. Taking a nap (anytime after 2.30pm) in the day could disrupt your night-time sleep. Experiment and find your best combinations and work with it.



- **Exercise** - Regular exercise benefits sleep, but not too late in the evening. The best time to exercise is in the morning or early afternoon. Morning exercise is a great way to have morning light which suppresses the sleep hormone melatonin and helps to wake you up as well.
- **Bedtime Snacks** - a light snack before bed might help you sleep, unless it causes problems with indigestion. You should avoid heavy meals and caffeine containing drinks late in the evening. A glass of warm milk before bed may also help, providing that it does not mean you wake up to urinate.
- **Alcohol** - Alcohol in the evening does **not** help sleep. You may fall asleep more easily, but your sleep is likely to be more fragmented sleep and will increase the number of wakes in the middle of the night.
- **Make sure your sleeping environment is comfortable** – A dark room, that is not too hot or cold make for an optimal sleep environment. You spend a lot of time in bed, if you're having trouble sleeping don't put up with a suboptimal bedroom.

ABOUT US

Sleep Disorders Australia (SDA) is a voluntary not-for-profit organisation that provides information and support to people affected by sleep disorders throughout Australia. SDA advocates the needs of people with sleep disorders by raising awareness of sleep disorders and their impact on our lives. We also offer support and education with regards to preventing and treating sleep disorders.

We would be delighted if you joined us. Membership is open to sufferers, family members, medical professionals, and the general public. You can join via our website or email our membership officer for more information.

If you would like to support us financially, you can donate via our website or send a cheque to our address.

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DISCLAIMER: Information in this fact sheet is general in nature. It is not a substitute for professional medical advice. Discuss with your doctor if you are concerned about your sleep or other medical conditions.

