



Sleep Health

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Getting a good-quality and quantity of sleep is vital to achieving and maintaining optimal mental and physical health. Despite this, as many as 40% of Australian adults experience sleep problems at any one time (www.workalert.org.au). Not getting enough sleep can impact many aspects of our life, in particular productivity and safety in the workplace.

It is well known that sleep is strongly impacted by stress and can lead to the common sleep disorder, insomnia. Insomnia is the persistent difficulty with falling asleep and staying asleep, with 1 in 3 people experiencing mild insomnia at some time (Sleep Health Foundation). Stress, worry or irritability experienced at work can lead to sleep disturbance. Over time, persistent sleep disturbance can make concentration and productivity at work even more difficult, leading to further stress.

Health Professionals around the world regularly share sleep hygiene strategies. These include habits and practices that are conducive to sleeping well on a regular basis such as monitoring caffeine intake, good temperature control, avoiding alcohol intake, improved level of darkness in the bedroom and other great tips to achieve a good night's sleep. These strategies are good to know, however they often don't always address the problem experienced by many. Trying to implement all of these 'do this' and 'don't do this' strategies can also incidentally ramp up your hyperarousal at bedtime.

Good sleep health can be achieved through understanding the many things that can affect the quality of sleep and taking a problem-solving approach to changes you implement. The five key factors or principles to improve sleep considered by the Sleep Health Foundation are:

Ensure you're sleepy enough and ready for bed

Your sleep drive rises with each waking hour and is typically high at bedtime. Going to bed too early or when you are still wired or stressed may mean your sleep drive is not high enough to fall asleep easily. Giving yourself additional time to unwind is more effective than attempting to go to bed at a strict time each night. An afternoon nap or falling asleep in front of the TV in the evening will reduce your sleep time at bedtime. Recognising when you are tired or sleeping, and only going to bed when you are sleepy can increase your capacity to fall asleep and stay asleep. Limiting your time in bed can help avoid a habit of wakefulness when attempting to sleep, during the night or before getting up. Sticking to the same waking up times in the mornings, including on the weekend, can help to maximise your sleep drive at bedtime.

Look after your body rhythm and natural body clock

Good sleep is more likely when your body rhythm is consistent. Melatonin is a hormone your body produces naturally and is often called the "sleep hormone".

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Melatonin needs darkness to be secreted, with levels starting to rise during the early evening. Ensuring you have a one-hour buffer from exposure to bright light at least one hour before bed can assist your body's production of melatonin, preparing your body for sleep. Good sleep is also more likely when your internal body clock or rhythm is in line with daytime hours for your wake cycle. Exposure to good outdoor light, especially morning light to suppress the melatonin production on waking, as well as increased activity and exercise during the day can help you to look after your body rhythm.

Minimise internal disruptions

Internal disruptions that create poor sleep are caused by your mind (mental) or your body (physical). Mental disruptions can be due to your mind being too active to fall asleep. Avoiding taking your worries to bed can be achieved through practicing good strategies such as jotting down your worries and options for managing these; mindfulness strategies; journaling or other emotional regulation techniques before bedtime. Physical disruptions can include breathing problems (such as snoring or sleep apnoea), physical problems interfering with sleep (pain, restless legs) or stimulants such as caffeine, nicotine or alcohol. If you think you have some breathing or physical problems speak to your GP about a referral to a sleep specialist. Further information on the impact of caffeine, nicotine or alcohol on sleep can be found on the [Sleep Health Foundation Website](#).

Minimising external disruptions

Removing external disruptions can be especially helpful if you are a light sleeper or have trouble returning to sleep after being awoken. External disturbances can be caused by pets in the bedroom, morning light too early, poor temperature control (too hot/cold) or partner noises such as snoring. Simple strategies such as ear plugs or eye covers, as well as changes to your bedroom space could be considered to minimise external disruptions.

A positive and respectful attitude towards sleep

This principle is not just for those who tend to stay up late, spend too much time watching Netflix or have poor sleep habits, but those who have already labeled themselves as poor sleepers. Having good knowledge and understanding of a normal sleep cycle, which includes periods of lighter and deeper sleep throughout the night with brief awakenings, can ensure people have a positive relationship with sleep. Accepting that for some people it may take many months of implementing positive changes to their sleep habits before consistent good-quality sleep is achieved can avoid you falling into the trap of labelling yourself a poor sleeper and giving in.

Final Words

Research shows that most adults need about 8 hours of sleep per night. Sleep helps promote attention, memory and learning which improves our alertness, mental functioning and productivity both in the workplace and at home. Understanding the key aspects and principles of sleep, as well as maintaining good sleep hygiene is key to achieve good-quality restorative sleep.

