

## Feedback

We appreciate and encourage feedback. If you need advice or are concerned about any aspect of care or treatment please speak to a member of staff or contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS):

**Freephone:** 0800 183 0204

**From a mobile or abroad:** 0115 924 9924 ext 65412 or 62301

**E-mail:** [pals@nuh.nhs.uk](mailto:pals@nuh.nhs.uk)

**Letter:** NUH NHS Trust, c/o PALS,  
Freepost NEA 14614,  
Nottingham, NG7 1BR

[www.nuh.nhs.uk](http://www.nuh.nhs.uk)

# How to sleep well

Information for patients

**Epilepsy service**

If you require a full list of references for this leaflet please email [patientinformation@nuh.nhs.uk](mailto:patientinformation@nuh.nhs.uk) or phone 0115 924 9924 ext. 67184.

The Trust endeavours to ensure that the information given here is accurate and impartial.

This document can be provided in different languages and formats. For more information please contact:

Epilepsy Service Nurse Advice Line  
QMC/City

Tel: 0115 970 9030

This leaflet provides information to help reduce sleep problems and ideas to deal effectively with sleep difficulties when they occur.

## Sleep

Sleep is essential for good health and wellbeing. The amount of sleep people need varies widely and usually reduces with age.

Most people have difficulty sleeping at some point in their life. Poor quality sleep has a harmful effect on mood, memory and performance.

This booklet contains information to help people who have trouble sleeping. It will help you to think about your current sleep habits and suggests ideas to help you sleep better.

## What causes poor sleep?

Poor sleep can be caused by many things including, poor sleep habits, stress, anxiety, depression, alcohol, substance misuse, pain or certain medicines.

Insomnia is when a person has difficulty falling or staying asleep, wakes too early, or feels unrefreshed in the morning.

It is not uncommon for people to experience these symptoms every now and then. Insomnia is when these symptoms have been present for at least a month (a chronic problem) and are interfering with the ability to function during the day.

## How age influences sleep

The amount and quality of our sleep is affected by age. Sleep becomes shorter and lighter as we get older. This is quite normal but means older adults are more likely to naturally wake during the night and be disturbed by noise, discomfort or pain.

Melatonin is sometimes given (usually as Circadin®) to treat insomnia as part of a sleep hygiene plan when behavioural methods alone haven't worked. It is not a sedative as such, although it can make you feel a little drowsy. It is sometimes used to help people with a learning disability and those with challenging behaviour who have disturbed or disrupted sleep. Treatment response should be recorded in a sleep diary and reviewed regularly.

## Further information

The following resources may be helpful. The web links and some examples of sleep diaries can be accessed through the sleep page on our epilepsy service website.

### Epilepsy Service

[www.nuh.nhs.uk/epilepsy](http://www.nuh.nhs.uk/epilepsy)

### The Sleep Council

[www.sleepcouncil.org.uk](http://www.sleepcouncil.org.uk)

### Insomnia Therapy Workshops

[thesleepschool.org](http://thesleepschool.org)

### Insomnia and sleep resources and advice

[www.nottinghamshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/resources-](http://www.nottinghamshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/resources-)

### Royal College of Psychiatrists

[www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinformation/mentalhealthproblems/sleepproblems/sleepingwell](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinformation/mentalhealthproblems/sleepproblems/sleepingwell)

### NHS website

[www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/Insomnia/Pages/insomnihome.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/Insomnia/Pages/insomnihome.aspx)

### Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust

[www.choiceandmedication.org.uk/nottinghamshirehealthcare](http://www.choiceandmedication.org.uk/nottinghamshirehealthcare)

### National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

[www.nice.org.uk/guidance/](http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/)

If a person tends to fall asleep too early (e.g. early evening) and get up too early, exposure to bright light in the late afternoon and early evening may be helpful. Delay breakfast for early risers until a sensible time.

## Sleep diaries

Improving “sleep hygiene” and sticking to planned changes can often really help to improve sleep. It may be helpful to keep a sleep diary (see page 7) for a short time to help identify the problem better and record progress. If you try the tips in this booklet and are still struggling to sleep, see your doctor, pharmacist, or nurse for further advice.

## Will sleeping pills help?

Although sleeping pills (also known as hypnotics) can be very effective at relieving insomnia and help in getting back into a good sleep routine, they do not address the underlying cause(s) of insomnia. Good sleep hygiene is essential.

Long-term, continuous use of sleeping pills is not generally recommended as your body may get used to them which makes them less effective over time, and some people can find it difficult to stop taking them. If you have been taking sleeping pills for a long period of time (more than one month) you should not stop taking them abruptly but should discuss this first with your doctor.

## Melatonin

Melatonin is the brain's regulator of sleep. It is naturally produced in the brain in the hours of darkness to promote sleep. Artificial light from screens (e.g. TVs, iPads, computer screens) reduces the amount of melatonin the body releases and prolongs the time it takes to fall asleep. Cutting those out for a few hours before bedtime is important.

## How sleep problems become chronic

Some people are more prone to sleep problems than others. Certain life events can trigger episodes of poor sleep such as emotional stress, anxiety, low mood, a change in the environment or routine and ill health. Alcohol, substance misuse and some medicines also cause sleep problems.

Once a sleep problem has developed, common habits or behaviours people adopt to cope with the problem tend to make the problem worse. These habits can prevent recovery.

## Habits and sleep

People who sleep poorly at night often develop habits like lying in later in the morning or napping during the day, drinking lots of tea, coffee and high energy drinks during the day to stay alert, which reduce sleepiness at bedtime. These habits help to compensate for the lack of sleep at night but they also help to maintain the problem.

If you sleep during the day you are highly likely to wake at night. If you need a daytime nap because of a particular health issue, it is best to nap early in the day.

## Taking back control

People who develop, or live with someone who has a sleep problem often say “it has been like this for years”, or “I have tried everything and nothing has helped”.

If sleep is problematic it is important to practice good “sleep hygiene”. This means doing the things which are known to improve sleep and avoid those things which are known to disturb sleep.

Learn more with the Loughborough University self-help programme on our sleep page at [www.nuh.nhs.uk/epilepsy](http://www.nuh.nhs.uk/epilepsy).

## Tips to encourage good sleep

- Try to take regular exercise during the day.
- Try to spend time in daylight (or bright artificial light) during the day. If you spend a lengthy time sitting, try to sit near a window.
- Do something relaxing before bedtime e.g. have a warm bath or listen to soft music.
- Keep a regular time for going to bed. This is usually when you feel sleepy.
- Try a hot, milky or decaffeinated drink near bedtime. Cherry juice and bananas are also good.
- Keep the bedroom cool, quiet, and dark at night. Make the bed as comfy as possible.
- Try wearing earplugs at night to block out external noises.
- Put any worries to one side until morning. A “worry journal” next to the bed can be helpful.
- Get up at the same time each morning regardless of how long you slept.

## Things to avoid

- Bright light in the evening.
- Watching TV, listening to radio, or eating in the bedroom. Keep the bedroom mainly for sleeping.
- Artificial light from computer screens, iPads, mobile phones in the evenings before bed.
- Heavy meals, sugary foods and drinks, alcohol, caffeine and energy drinks (e.g. coffee, tea, chocolate, cola) in the evening. Sensitivity to caffeine increases with age.
- Snacks if you wake in the night.
- Smoking around bedtime and first thing in the morning.
- Napping or long periods of inactivity during the day.
- Vigorous exercise within 2 hours of the usual bedtime.

## Night time walking

Consider what might be causing you to wake; an uncomfortable bed, needing the toilet, being too warm or cold, poorly, or worrying about something. Get up and go to another room if you can't settle. Don't watch TV, or use a computer, iPad or mobile phone. The light from these devices promotes wakefulness. Return to bed when sleepy.

If you are caring for someone with a sleep problem try to let them resettle on their own, if possible. If you have to intervene keep contact to a minimum. If they need a drink offer a few sips of water only. Avoid eye contact, guide them back to bed and use a set bedtime phrase such as “sleep well, see you in the morning”.

## Bedtime routine

Develop a good routine and stick to it. This is particularly important when caring for someone else with a sleep problem, for example someone with a learning disability.

Establish a set order of events which lead to bedtime. Provide a peaceful, calm atmosphere. Try to choose a short routine; have a bath, pyjamas on, warm milky drink, brush teeth, listen to soft music in a dimly lit room. The routine should always have a clear end point that signals it is now time to go to sleep, such as turning the light off and having a set goodnight phrase, “sleep well, see you in the morning”.

People who don't fall asleep until late tend to sleep-in later in the morning when they get chance. This is not a good idea as it makes it likely they won't go to sleep until later the following night, reinforcing a bad habit. Try to have a fixed time for getting up and stick to it during the week and weekends.

Exposure to bright light in the morning may be helpful and avoid day time napping. The length of time a person sleeps during the day will usually reduce night time sleep by a similar amount.