

## Sleep

Sleep plays a vital role in your mental and physical wellbeing. Sleeping well can help you recover from the stresses of everyday life and fill you with energy for the day ahead. Most people need seven to eight hours sleep to feel refreshed the following morning but some find it difficult to sleep, and it is thought that as many as one in three people suffer from insomnia. This bulletin looks at the effects of poor sleep and offers advice to help you get a good night's rest.

### Why do you need sleep?

The exact function of sleep is not fully understood, but the effects of lack of sleep suggest that its main function is to rest and repair the body. Sleep allows you to recuperate both physically and psychologically. A good night's sleep can make you feel more alert, motivated and energised. Not only can sleep improve your concentration and alertness; it can also improve your skill and memory. Having a good night's sleep after learning a new task has been shown to dramatically improve performance.<sup>1</sup>

### Effects of Poor Sleep

For some, not sleeping many hours a night is a normal part of life. But does it really matter? Fatigue can impact all aspects of our lives, from personal relationships to our ability to focus and perform daily tasks. It is important to ensure that you make time for sleeping as not getting enough may impair your concentration; make you more irritable; and less able to cope with stress. Short sleep duration has also been linked to weight gain and obesity.<sup>2</sup>

At work, lack of sleep can have a major effect on your productivity. In a study by the National Sleep Foundation<sup>3</sup> two thirds of adults said that sleepiness interferes with their concentration and makes handling stress on the job more difficult. Overall, employees estimated that the quality and quantity of their work is diminished by about 30% when they are sleepy. Accident statistics have shown that daytime sleepiness can double the chance of having an accident while operating machinery or driving a car.

### How to get a good night's sleep

There are a number of things that people affected by insomnia can do to help themselves:

#### **Create a restful environment**

Ensure that your bedroom is quiet, dark and comfortable and that it is neither too hot nor too cold. Remove TV's, laptops or any other distractions so that the bedroom is always a place of rest.

### **Wind down**

Find time to relax before bedtime by having a warm bath or listening to relaxing music. Relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises can help to quiet your mind. If you are worried about the next day, in the early evening make a list of all the things you have to do. If concerns pop into your mind after you've climbed into bed, jot them down so you don't lie awake thinking about them.

### **Don't focus on lost sleep**

Don't allow yourself to become over anxious about falling asleep as this will only make it harder. Reassure yourself that you will be able to cope the next day and remain calm. If you find you really can't sleep move into a different room, read a book, make yourself a warm drink (not caffeinated) and go back to bed when you are sleepy.

### **Develop a routine**

Go to bed and get up at the same time every day, even at the weekend. Resist the urge to lie in if you haven't slept well, and avoid cat-napping during the day as this can upset your normal routine and impair the quality of your sleep.

### **Eat earlier in the evening**

The timing of your evening meal before bed might also affect your ability to fall asleep. One study shows that people who eat four hours before going to bed get to sleep much more quickly than those eating an hour before bed.<sup>4</sup> Avoid rich food and try to leave at least an hour and a half between dinner and bedtime.

### **Avoid caffeine and alcohol**

Caffeine is a stimulant that will stay in your system for many hours, so try to avoid coffee, chocolate, cola drinks and non-herbal teas after 5pm. Caffeine has also been shown to increase feelings of worry at night,<sup>5</sup> which can then lead to sleep problems. A mug of warm milk with honey or soothing camomile tea is a good substitute. Drinking alcohol may make you feel tired but as the alcohol wears off during the night the quality of your sleep will be affected and it could cause you to wake in the early hours of the morning.

### **A healthy lifestyle**

Regular exercise is a great way to improve your sleep but don't do it too close to bedtime as it produces stimulants that will keep you awake. Finish your exercise at least 3 hours before bedtime. Smokers can find it harder to fall asleep than non-smokers due to the stimulant properties of nicotine. Sleep related breathing problems are also more common in smokers.

### **Further help**

Many people have trouble sleeping at some point in their lives. For most it is only short term, lasting for several nights and then resolving itself. However, if you have had difficulty sleeping or persistent tiredness for a period of time, it may be worth talking to your GP so that possible physical causes can be ruled out. Your GP will also be able to offer advice if snoring is the cause of your sleeplessness.

### **Emotional Support**

Anxiety, stress and depression are all major causes of insomnia. Any traumatic experience is likely to result in disturbed nights. Stressful events such as unemployment, bereavement or divorce frequently trigger bouts of insomnia. If you feel that an emotional problem may be causing your difficulties, or if you are suffering from nightmares, it may be helpful to talk to a counsellor or psychotherapist. Seeking this form of assistance can help you to deal with the root cause of the problem.

### **BUPA Employee Assistance**

Through BUPA Employee Assistance you have access to counsellors 24 hours a day to talk about any issue that may be causing you difficulty sleeping.

### **Further information**

#### **Mind**

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

#### **British Snoring and Sleep Apnoea Association**

[www.britishsnoring.co.uk](http://www.britishsnoring.co.uk)

01737 245 638

#### **BUPA Employee Assistance**

0800 269616

#### **BUPA Employee Assistance Ireland**

1800 650 138

Calls to 0800 numbers from landlines are free, however, mobile phone providers may charge. If you are calling BUPA Employee Assistance from outside the UK, dial +44 20 8947 2690.

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<sup>1</sup> Harvard Medical School Press Centre, Press Release 2 July 2002

<sup>2</sup> The University of Warwick, Press Release, 12 July 2006: Sleep deprivation doubles risk of obesity in both children and adults

<sup>3</sup> National Sleep Foundation releases new statistics on 'Sleep in America'. National Sleep Foundation, 2000.  
[www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org)

<sup>4</sup> High-glycemic-index carbohydrate meals shorten sleep onset. Afaghi A *et al.* American Journal of Clinical Nutrition 2007; Vol 85; 426-430. Visited 16 March 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Night-time thoughts in high and low worriers: reaction to caffeine-induced sleeplessness. Omvik S *et al.* Behav Res Ther 2007; 45(4); 715-727.