

Longing For A Good Night's Sleep?

Q: Do older people need less sleep than younger people?

A: No. Older adults need about the same amount of sleep as younger adults: 7 to 9 hours each night. But seniors tend to go to sleep earlier and get up earlier than when they were younger. Older people also may nap more during the day, which can sometimes make it harder to fall asleep at night.

How many times have you heard someone say, "All I need is a good night's sleep?" There's no question that getting enough sleep helps you stay healthy and alert. But many older people don't sleep well. You shouldn't wake up every day feeling tired.

There are two kinds of sleep: Rapid eye movement (REM) sleep and non-REM sleep. Our dreams occur mostly during REM sleep, and we have the deepest sleep during non-REM sleep. As you get older, you spend less time in deep sleep, which may explain why older people are often light sleepers.

If you aren't getting enough sleep, you can feel irritable, have memory problems, be forgetful, feel depressed, have more falls or accidents, and feel very sleepy during the day.

According to the National Institute on Aging, there are many reasons why older people may not get enough sleep at night. Feeling sick or being in pain can make it hard to sleep. Napping during the day can disrupt sleep at night. Some medicines can keep you awake.

The most common sleep problem in older adults is insomnia: having trouble falling asleep and staying asleep. It may take you a long time to fall asleep, or wake up several times in the night, or wake up early and be unable to get back to sleep, or wake up feeling tired. Insomnia can last for days, months, or even years. Sometimes insomnia may be a sign of other problems. Or, it could be a side effect of a medication or an illness. Being unable to sleep can become a habit.

Here are some tips for getting a better night's sleep:

- Take time to relax before bedtime each night. It's ok to watch television, read a book, listen to soothing music, or soak in a warm bath.
- Go to sleep and get up at the same time each day, even on weekends. Avoid napping in the late afternoon or evening, as it may keep you awake at night.
- Keep your bedroom dark, not too hot or too cold, and as quiet as possible. Have a comfortable mattress, a pillow you like, and enough blankets for the season.
- Don't exercise within 3 hours of your bedtime, and try to get outside in the sunlight each day.
- Large meals close to bedtime can keep you awake, but a light snack in the evening can help you get a good night's sleep. Avoid caffeine (coffee, tea, soda, or hot chocolate) late in the day. Alcohol will not help you sleep, and drink fewer beverages in the evening.
- After turning off the light, give yourself about 20 minutes to fall asleep. If you're still awake and not drowsy, get out of bed. When you feel sleepy, go back to bed.
- Have a good lamp within reach that turns on easily, and put a glass of water next to the bed in case you wake up thirsty. Put nightlights in the bathroom and hall.
- Remove area rugs so you don't trip on your way to the bathroom.
- Try counting slowly to 100, or relaxing your body by telling yourself that your toes feel light as air, and then work your way up the rest of the body saying the same words.

If you feel tired for more than 2 or 3 weeks, you may have a sleep problem. Talk to your doctor about changes you can make to get a better night's sleep. Some seniors who have trouble sleeping turn to over-the-counter sleep aids. But medicines are not a cure for insomnia. Developing healthy habits at bedtime may help you get a better night's sleep.

For more information: contact the National Sleep Foundation at www.sleepfoundation.org

Here are some helpful resources:

American Academy of Sleep Medicine

2510 North Frontage Road

Darien, IL 60561

1-630-737-9700

www.aasmnet.org

American Sleep Apnea Association

6856 Eastern Avenue, NW

Suite 203

Washington, DC 20012

1-202-293-3650

www.sleepapnea.org

Better Sleep Council

501 Wythe Street

Alexandria, VA 22314-1917

1-703-683-8371

www.bettersleep.org

National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute

P.O. Box 30105

Bethesda, MD 20824-0105

1-301-592-8573

1-240-629-3255 (TTY)

www.nhlbi.nih.gov

National Institute on Neurological Disorders and Stroke

P.O. Box 5801

Bethesda, MD 20824

1-800-352-9424 (toll-free)

1-301-468-5981 (TTY)

www.ninds.nih.gov

National Sleep Foundation

1010 North Glebe Road

Suite 310

Arlington, VA 22201

1-703-243-1697

www.sleepfoundation.org

Restless Legs Syndrome Foundation, Inc.

1530 Greenview Drive, SW

Suite 210

Rochester, MN 55902

1-507-287-6465

www.rls.org

Some seniors who have trouble sleeping turn to over-the-counter sleep aids. But medicines are not a cure for insomnia. Developing healthy habits at bedtime may help you get a good night's sleep.

Another sleep disorder is sleep apnea---or short pauses in breathing while sleeping. These pauses can happen many times during the night. Sleep apnea can lead to other problems like high blood pressure or stroke. You can have sleep apnea and not even know it. But your loud snoring and gasping for air can keep other people awake. You may need to learn to sleep in a position that keeps your airways open, or sleep with two pillows to elevate your head. There are also medical devices that could help. But start off by asking your doctor how to determine if you have sleep apnea.

Alzheimer's Disease often changes a person's sleeping habits. Some people with Alzheimer's sleep too much, others don't sleep enough. Some people wander or yell at night. Caregivers may have sleepless nights too. If you are caring for someone with Alzheimer's, make sure the floor is clear of objects lock up any medicines, install grab bars in the bathroom, and place a gate across the stairs.

For more information about health and aging, contact:

**National Institute on Aging
Information Center**

P.O. Box 8057

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)

1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)

www.nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov/espanol

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Visit www.nihseniorhealth.gov, a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This website has health and wellness information for older adults. Special features make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to make the type larger.

National Institute on Aging

National Institutes of Health

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U.S. Department of Health and Human Service