

HOW TO DEAL WITH SLEEP PROBLEMS

Up to 50% of the elderly complain of insomnia, but although such complaints are prevalent and are often accompanied by higher rates of mental and physical health problems, sleep problems are usually not identified or managed appropriately.

Disturbed Sleep in Older People Has the Following Impact:

- Difficulty sustaining attention.
- Slowed response time.
- Difficulty with memory.
- Decreased performance.
- Depression and anxiety.

(All of the above may be misinterpreted as dementia.)

- Excessive, intrusive daytime sleepiness.
- Increased risk of accidents and falls.
- Impaired mood.
- Impaired vigilance.
- Impaired problem solving.

Although sleep patterns change with ageing, sleep problems can occur as a result of the following:

- Psychological stress.
- Medical illness that causes pain, breathing problems, urination difficulties (especially for older men), and other physical conditions.
- Psychiatric problems such as anxiety, depression or dementia.
- Medications that cause insomnia as a side-effect.

What Can You Do to Improve Sleep:

See your primary care doctor for a proper assessment and advice. Things that should be checked for include:

- Medications that can disturb sleep.
- Medical conditions (such as heart and respiratory diseases) that disturb sleep.
- Sleep disorders.

Common Conditions that Disturb Sleep in Older People

Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS) is a sleep disorder characterised by unpleasant leg sensations that disrupt sleep. The most common symptom is a compelling urge to move the lower extremities. Creepy crawly, itching, burning, and pain are reported as well. It can occasionally affect the arms.

Obstructive Sleep Apnea is a condition in which people stop breathing while asleep due to blockage of the airway and is very common in older people. Affected people have day time sleepiness, snoring at night, or are observed to be breathing but air not flowing air when sleeping.

Improve Sleep Hygiene

- Prolonged use of sleeping pills can result in falls, dependence and withdrawal effects, so barring any underlying medical conditions (as noted on the previous page), you should aim for other, non-medical ways of improving sleep before using sleep medication.

Try to Improve Sleep by the Following Measures:

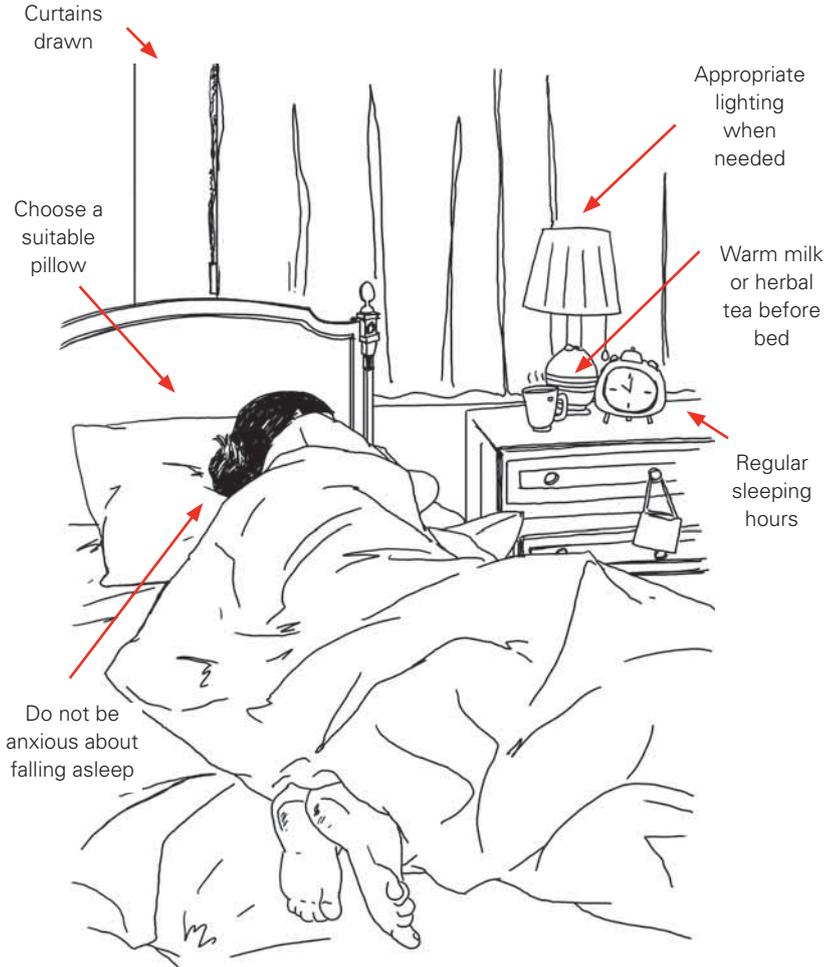
- Establish regular sleeping hours.
- Use the bedroom only for sleep and not for other activities such as watching TV.
- Avoid caffeine and cigarettes at least four hours before bed.
- Avoid alcohol at least two hours before bed and do not use it as sleeping aid.
- Avoid stressful work before going to bed.
- Avoid exercise at least two hours before.
- Avoid fluids two hours before bed.
- Avoid being too hungry or too full.
- Avoid daytime naps; if necessary, nap no more than 30 minutes and before 3.00pm.
- The bedroom environment should be comfortable and quiet with appropriate lighting.
- Activities that promote relaxation such as listening to soft music and reading a book can help and be included in routine before sleep.
- Try taking a hot bath 90 minutes before bed.

- Do try to get some exercise and sunlight in the day.
- Do not be anxious about falling asleep.
- If you can't fall asleep, it is better to wake up, read a book and wait till the next sleepy cycle before going to sleep again.

Reference:

- ¹ *National Institutes of Health, State of the Science Conference on Management of Chronic Insomnia in Adults. Sleep 28(9): 1049 – 1057, 2005.*
- ² *Information courtesy of Harrison Bloom, MD, International Longevity Center, USA.*

HOW TO IMPROVE SLEEP



Improving your sleep will give you more energy, and will help you deal with pain both psychologically and physically.