Improving your sleep

Sleep is an important part of our daily routine and supports physical and emotional wellbeing. Quality sleep allows the brain and body to recover or 'recharge' and develop. It also gives us a break from the stress and demands of life.

How sleep works

While we rest, our brain goes through four stages of sleep about every 90 minutes. On occasion, such as when we are sick, spending more time in bed can be helpful. However, in the longer term, spending too much time in bed can make sleep worse.

The ideal amount of sleep varies between individuals and changes as we get older. Most adults need seven to nine hours sleep. While some people can thrive on four hours sleep each night, others feel they need 10 hours.

Humans have 'biological clocks' that function on a 24-hour rhythm in line with the rotation of the planet. We have cues that help the brain and body keep these rhythms.

Light and darkness are important cues. As the sun sets, our body starts to produce the sleep hormone melatonin, we slow down and our core body temperature drops, preparing us for sleep. In the morning, as daylight increases, our body stops producing melatonin and body temperature increases, prompting us to wake.

Our exposure to light and darkness plays an important role in sleep patterns.

Having a regular routine and sleep pattern is one of the most important things you can do.

There are many things that can affect sleep such as stress, medication, behaviours and habits (eg: using electronic devices or drinking alcohol at night), shift work, chronic pain, diabetes, needing to urinate multiple times during the night, and mental health issues.

Other disorders that can impact sleep include snoring, sleep apnoea, restless leg syndrome, grinding teeth and insomnia. Finding a solution to these often requires seeing a professional.

Over time, a lack of sleep can become distressing, and have a range of negative effects.

Effects of poor sleep

Ongoing lack of sleep can affect our mental alertness, mood, judgement, quality of life and health. Increased risk of a range of health problems has been linked to long term lack of sleep. These include mental health disorders, diabetes, obesity, heart problems, infections and pain.

It can be useful to keep a sleep log or use smart technology to collect data about your sleep, so you can gain an understanding of your sleep patterns.

Sleep medication may assist in the short term but is not recommended for longer periods of time and may actually cause other problems.

It is possible to be tested for a sleep disorder, which usually involves a doctor's referral to a specialist sleep service. Tests may include spending the night at a sleep centre where your sleep is recorded and a machine monitors your breathing, oxygen levels, eye movements and brain waves. Speak to a doctor about long-term sleep problems.

Tips to improve sleep

Environment

▸ **Create a peaceful room** for sleeping. Make it cool, dark and quiet. Don't watch TV, work, make phone calls, look at your electronic devices or have a computer in the room. Reserve your bedroom for sleeping so your mind connects the room to relaxation and sleep.

▸ **Have a comfortable bed** with enough blankets to stay warm. Warm hands and feet are essential. A heat bag or hot water bottle can be useful in the colder weather. Some people find a weighted blanket useful.

Actions

▸ **Set a schedule** and try to stick to it, even on weekends. Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day. Allow a maximum of eight hours. This gets your body into a rhythm.

▸ **Avoid sleeping during the day**. If you feel you need a nap, limit it to 30 minutes.

▸ **Exercise** at least 30 minutes each day but don't exercise in the two hours before going to bed.

▸ **Time your meals** so that you don't go to bed hungry or after over-eating. Finish your evening meal at least two hours before you go to bed.

▸ **Avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol**, especially late in the day and before bed. Remember that most teas, soft drinks and chocolate also contain caffeine. A diet high in sugar can also disturb sleep.

▸ **Get some sunlight** during the day. This helps your body get into a sleep pattern (circadian rhythm), prompts it to produce the sleep hormone melatonin and is good for overall wellbeing.

▸ **Relax before bed**. Create a 'buffer zone' between action and sleep. Find what works for you. Try soaking in a bath, meditating, reading, yoga, deep breathing, or another relaxing routine.

Mental state

▸ **Manage your worries and calm your mind**. Before going to bed, it might help to write down the things you need to do and the things you are worried about, to get them out of you mind.

▸ **Use a sleep app** with relaxation techniques, sleep meditations, sleep stories, soothing sounds and white noise. Try different apps to see if any work for you. Many are free to use.

▸ **Try not to force sleep** or get distressed when you can't sleep. This can make things worse.

▸ **Don't lie in bed anxious, angry or alert**. Get up and do something calming, such as listening to music or reading until you feel tired. If you are lying in bed awake but feeling drowsy and cosy, it's best to stay in bed.

Many people suffer with sleep difficulties. There is help available; you don't need to struggle alone.

Sources

The Sleep Foundation www.sleepfoundation.org;

Sleep Matters Perth: Insomnia Solutions www.sleepmattersperth.com

CONSUMER REVIEWED

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