

Sleep | Factsheet

Sleep is a period of rest and recuperation for the body and brain. We all vary in the amount of sleep we need. Factors such as age, lifestyle, diet, personality and environment can all play a part. Generally, we need less sleep as we get older. New-born babies tend to sleep for around 16 hours out of every 24, while adults average 7 hours and the elderly only 6.

The Body Clock

Sleep is regulated by an internal 'clock', which is tuned by the day–night cycles (circadian rhythm). When the sun sets, your brain starts to release 'sleepy' chemicals, until eventually you feel the need to retire for the night. In the morning, exposure to daylight prompts your brain to release 'awake' chemicals.

Sleep Stages

We go through various distinct stages of sleep, over and over, every night. Generally, the brain moves from light sleep to deeper sleep and eventually to rapid eye movement, or REM, sleep. REM sleep occurs regularly, about once every 90 to 120 minutes. Brain waves in REM sleep are faster than in non-REM sleep. REM sleep is associated with dreaming and with stimulation of the parts of the brain used for learning, while body repair and growth tends to happen during non REM sleep. It is important to get the right mix of both REM and non-REM sleep to maintain our natural sleep cycle and help us wake rested and refreshed.

Common Sleep Disorders

Sleep can be disturbed in many ways. Some of the more common sleep complaints include:

- **Insomnia** – difficulties in getting to sleep or staying asleep
- **Jet lag** – a different time zone throws off the body's internal clock, which takes a few days to reset. Working night shift can mimic the symptoms of jet lag
- **Narcolepsy** – extreme tiredness with intermittent sleepiness during the day, which can include involuntary napping
- **Periodic limb movement disorder (Myoclonus)** – muscle spasms of the legs that often wake up the sleeper. This is more common in the middle aged and elderly
- **Restless legs** – this feels like cramps or some kind of irritation in the lower legs, which makes the person need to move their legs or get up and walk around
- **Snoring** – breathing through the mouth while asleep, which is more common in males
- **Sleep apnoea** – the upper airway is blocked, causing airflow and breathing to stop for a time during sleep
- **Sleep starts** – common feeling of muscle jerks or a sensation of falling that happens when a person is just going off to sleep
- **Sleepwalking** – tends to affect children more than adults
- **REM sleep behaviour disorder** – the sleeper tends to act out what's happening in their dreams, which could mean punching or kicking

A Common Complaint

Insomnia is a symptom, not a disease. It means having trouble with how much or how well you sleep. This may be caused by difficulties in either falling or staying asleep. Self-reported sleeping problems, dissatisfaction with sleep quality and daytime tiredness are the only defining characteristics of insomnia because it is such an individual experience. Over one-third of people experience insomnia from time to time, but only around 5% need treatment for the condition. Transient or short-term insomnia is typically caused by such things as stressful episodes, jet lag, change in sleeping environments, some acute medical illness and stimulant medications. Normal sleeping habits return once the acute event is over. If a person has sleeping difficulties for a month or more, it is called persistent or chronic insomnia