

GUIDE: A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

Why we need sleep.

We all sleep, and the average person spends about a third of their life asleep, but why is a good night's sleep important?

We think of sleep as a time when the body shuts down and is at rest, but this is not the case, during sleep our bodies are working hard to restore, process and heal.

Sleep impacts on all areas of our wellbeing, from maintaining our weight, balancing our hormones and improving our memory. It also has a big impact on our mental health, safeguarding against stress and depression.

Many people suffer with sleep problems from falling asleep to staying asleep, which can take its toll on both mental and physical health.



How much sleep do we need?

There are many factors to the amount of sleep that we need, this includes our age, as a general rule the following is a good guide:

Babies up to 12 months old:

14 – 15 hours per day

Toddlers:

12 – 14 hours per day

School age children:

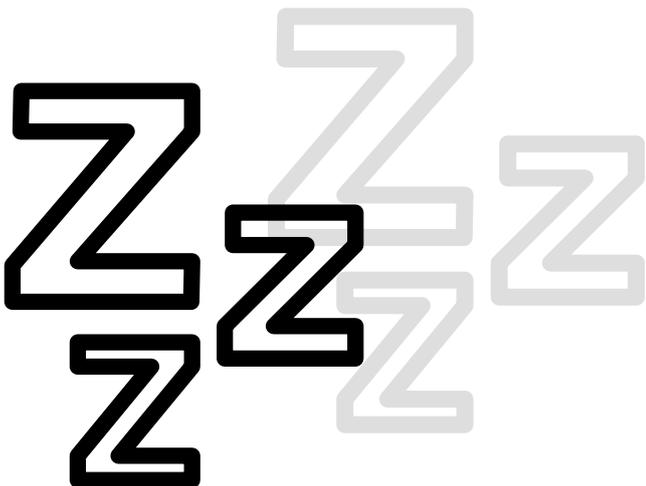
10 – 12 hours per day

Teenagers:

8 -9 hours per day

Adults:

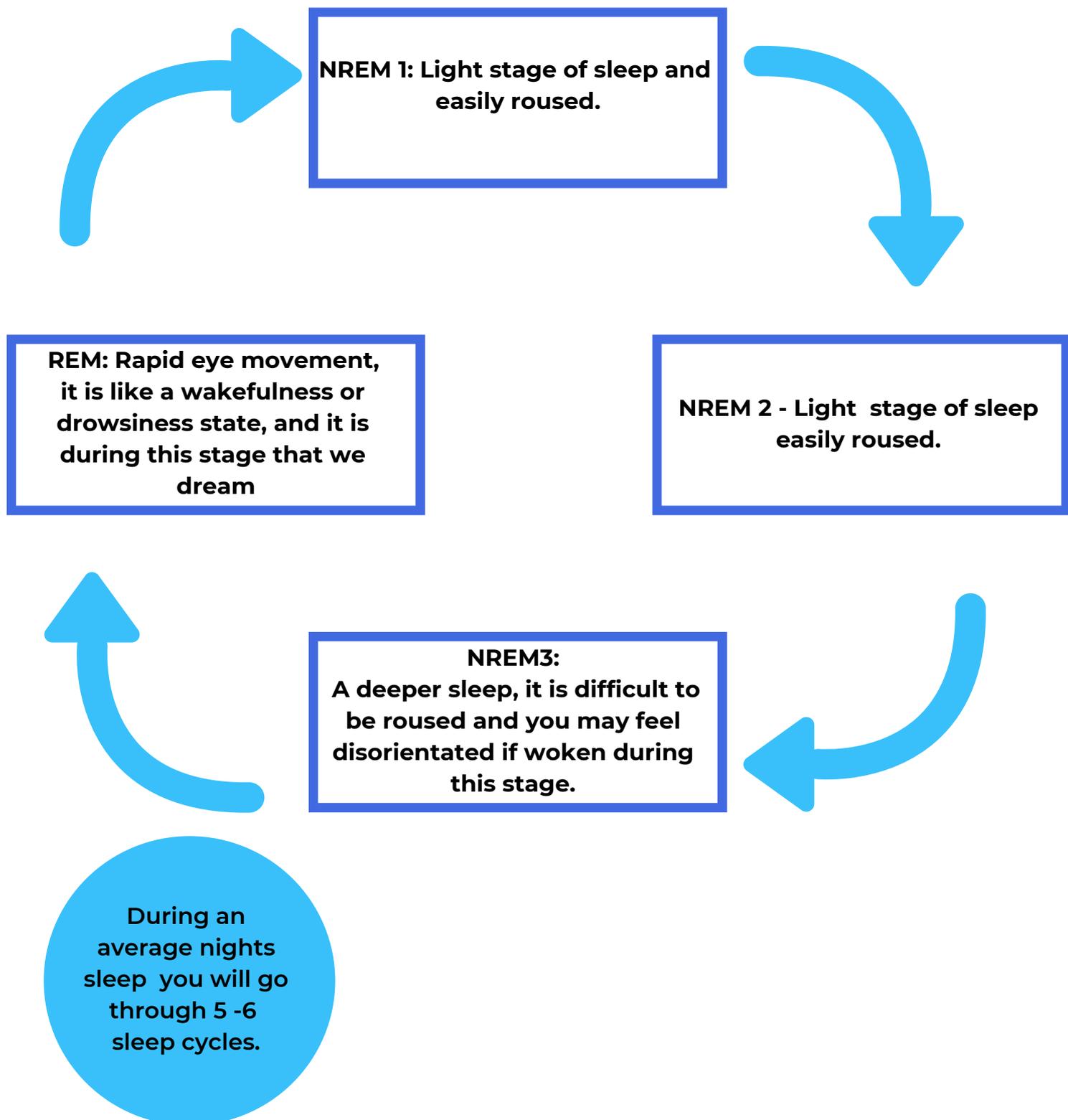
7 -9 hours per day



The importance of sleep cycles

To understand sleep cycles, we need to look at the four stages that make up each cycle.

Each full cycle lasts about 1 ½ hours and we must experience all four stages to feel fully refreshed when we wake up.



Getting a good night's sleep

Now, that we understand a little bit more about why we need sleep, how long we need and the sleep cycles, what steps can you take to get a better night's sleep?

The sleep council recommends these seven areas to help improve overall sleep quality.

1. Your bedroom

- Ensuring that your bedroom is a calm, clean, welcoming space is the first step to better sleep.
- At bedtime, ensure that your room is completely dark. Use a blackout blind or curtains, an additional window dressing, or even an eye mask. This is especially important if there is an outside source of light such as a street light or traffic that lightens your room.
- Maintain the temperature in your room at around 16-18° C (60-65° F). If you're too hot or too cold, you won't sleep soundly.
- Keep your bedroom tidy. De-clutter and create a space that's clean, neat and simple.
- Ban technology in the bedroom. That means no televisions and computers. If you do not have access to these you will reduce the urge to look at them when you find it difficult to get to sleep, leading to it taking longer to get to sleep and stay asleep.
- LED displays play havoc when it comes to getting a good night's sleep. Switch off your mobile phone, tablet, and any alarm clocks with a digital display.
- Avoid using certain colours such as red, yellows and oranges, this is too stimulating, instead go for calm, peaceful muted colours such as greens and blues.
- Certain smells can affect your mood, try some naturally calming essential oils or invest in ready made bedtime sprays.

Top Tip

De-clutter and keep work related items out of the bedroom. Keeping your bedroom for sleeping, will help you to unwind.



3. Your lifestyle

Today's lifestyle is fast paced, constantly on and packed with technology. We are available from the moment we wake up, with many people checking their phones, before their first cup of coffee. We live in a world of non stop simulation and this can make it difficult to switch off, leading to a terrible night's sleep.

There are a few small changes you can make to help you wind down and promote a good night's sleep:



Reduce intensity of artificial light, use dimmer switches or lower wattage bulbs.



Maintain a regular bedtime routine and sleep pattern, going to bed and waking up at the same time, even at weekends.



Avoid drinking caffeine or alcohol before bed, both are stimulants and will keep you awake. Try to not consume caffeine for 6 hours before your bedtime.



Switch off your tech a couple of hours before bed - including your phone. If this is not possible, avoid taking tech into your bedroom.



Always go to the loo before bed, and limit the amount you drink before you sleep.

4. Stress and worry

There is a direct relationship between anxiety and sleep. Scientists have found that when a person is anxious their heart rate increases, which also causes the brain to race. When your mind is alert it produces beta waves, which make you too stimulated to get to sleep. To make matters worse, an active brain is hard to shut down and triggers other worries, creating a pattern that leads to bedtime anxiety.



There are several techniques to banish anxiety and calm your heart rate. Cognitive behavioral therapy is one of them, helping people to 'unlearn' thought processes through psychological treatment. Talk to your GP who will be able to discuss and if appropriate refer you for this treatment.

There are other techniques that you can try to calm your mind when you have trouble sleeping:

1. You can manage your heart rate by placing your hand on your heart and listen for the beating. Breathe in deeply for four seconds, and then breathe out slowly. Repeat this until you can feel your heart rate slowing, which in turn slows down your busy brain activity.
- 2 Eliminate your anxious thoughts by practicing the speaking technique. This means voicing the thoughts that would otherwise live in your head. Speaking aloud overrides thinking, which stops your negative thoughts in their tracks. Practice by thinking the alphabet in your head, and when you reach 'J', start speaking out loud. What happened to the alphabet? Well, you stopped thinking it in your head, because speaking overrode those thoughts. Use this technique when you start worrying in bed: instead of thinking 'the mortgage is due and I don't have the money to pay it', say aloud 'we will find a way to pay the mortgage this month.'
3. If you find it hard to drop off to sleep or wake up worrying some people find that getting out of bed and doing something gentle such as light housework I.E wiping surfaces or doing some simple stretches, can take their mind off what is worrying them and help them to relax.
4. If you know that you are anxious about a specific issue, try giving that subject some time during the day, take 30 minutes to think about what is worrying you and how you can deal with it.

If you feel that you cannot manage your night time anxiety seek help from you GP.

5. Your diet

Diet has a big impact on sleep quality, some foods are known to aid sleep whilst others are known to have the opposite effect.

Trying to leave 4 hours between your main meal and bedtime is ideal, as late meals can make it difficult to sleep. However, this isn't always convenient and if you are eating nearer to bedtime, there are three main chemicals that promote good sleep: tryptophan, serotonin and melatonin, so eating foods that contain or produce these chemicals can lead to better sleep.

Foods that include these chemicals include:

Chicken, turkey, milk, bananas, nuts and seeds, cottage cheese, oats, almonds, walnuts, kiwi fruit and cherries.

Try to avoid the following foods, as they are more likely to keep you awake either from high caffeine levels or increased risk of heartburn and reflux:

Coffee, alcohol, fried foods, fatty meats, spicy foods,

Changing your diet can help you sleep, but it takes time. Start a sleep diary to keep track of your progress, and don't give up if you don't see a sudden improvement – sleeping well takes practice!



Top Tip

Eat a larger meal at lunchtime and a smaller meal in the evening if you are regularly eating your meals late in the evening.



6. Exercise

Regular exercise is an excellent way to help you get a better night's sleep, it has a number of benefits from gently tiring your body out, releasing pent up tension and banishing stress, exercising also lowers your body's temperature, which induces better sleep.

However, there are several things to keep in mind when exercising to improve your sleeping habits.

- Don't overdo it. Contrary to popular belief, wearing yourself out physically is not likely to induce sleepiness. In fact, it can often be counter productive, leading to additional alertness when trying to sleep.
- It's believed that exercising close to bedtime can disturb sleep, however there is no evidence to back this argument. As such, exercising in the evening is much better than not exercising at all!
- When it comes to exercise, the most important thing is to feel fitter and healthier. If you are experiencing sleeping problems, try to exercise a little more or change the type of activities you do. Yoga is renowned for its relaxation and sleep benefits, while moderate-aerobic exercise like walking has been found to help people fall asleep more quickly.

7. Relaxation

Life for most of us is very full, juggling demanding jobs and family life, leaves little time to relax. These elements make it very difficult to wind down. However, there are a few relaxation techniques that can help promote a deep, restful sleep.

Here are a few techniques recommended by the sleep council:

1. Relax your body

This method is best done in bed, though it can also be practiced throughout the day if you're in the right environment. By relaxing separate groups of muscles, you become more aware of your body and able to wind down mindfully.

1. Tense a muscle, for example your bicep, by contracting for 7-10 seconds. Flex it gently – do not strain.
2. At the same time, visualise the muscle being tensed, consciously feeling the build up of tension.
3. Release the muscle abruptly and then relax, allowing the body to go limp. Take a few moments before moving on to the next muscle.
4. Remember to keep the rest of your body relaxed whilst working on a particular muscle.

2. Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

CBT is commonly prescribed for depression, but clinical trials have shown it is the most effective long-term solution for insomniacs. CBT helps you identify the negative attitudes and beliefs that hinder your sleep, then replaces them with positive thoughts, effectively 'unlearning' the negative beliefs.

A typical exercise is to set aside 30 minutes per day, in which you do your day's worth of worrying. During this worry period you keep a diary of your worries and anxious thoughts, writing them down in order to reduce the weight in your mind. Once this task is complete, you are banned from worrying at any other point in the day.

Before you go to sleep, you can also write down the worries that you think may keep you awake. Once you are in bed with your eyes closed, you should imagine those thoughts floating away, leaving your mind free, peaceful, and ready to sleep.

3. Stimulus control – the 20 minute rule

We should all go to bed when we're tired, but if you're not asleep after twenty minutes, it's recommended that you get up and find another activity to do. This should be quiet and peaceful, and not involve your phone or other digital displays. Listening to music, reading or doing yoga are all recommended as great 20 minute rule activities.

When you feel sleepy again, you should return to bed. The idea of this method is to build a strong association between bed and sleeping, and eventually you'll be able to fall asleep quickly.

Don't worry if your sleeping doesn't improve right away, it can take time. However, don't ignore long periods of insomnia and visit your GP for help and advice on your sleep issues.

Keeping a sleep diary can help, and is a useful tool when talking to a doctor or sleep practitioner

Please note, this guide is not exhaustive and has been written to provide you with an overview of the topic in question.

The organisations below can provide more information on how to get a better night's sleep:

<https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/how-to-get-to-sleep/>

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/how-sleep-better>Text placeholder