

Sleep and Aging

Older adults need about the same amount of sleep as young adults: seven to nine hours each night. However, seniors tend to go to sleep earlier and get up earlier than when they were younger. Older people may nap more during the day, which can sometimes make it hard to fall asleep at night.

There are two kinds of sleep: REM (rapid eye movement) sleep and non-REM sleep. We dream mostly during REM sleep and have the deepest sleep during non-REM sleep. As people get older, they spend less time in deep sleep, which may be why older people are often light sleepers.

Sleep Problems

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 a person awake. No matter the reason, without a good night's sleep, the next day a person may:

- Be irritable
- Have memory problems or be forgetful
- Feel depressed
- Have more falls or accidents
- Feel very sleepy during the day

Insomnia

Insomnia is the most common sleep problem in adults age 60 and older. People with insomnia have trouble falling and staying asleep. Insomnia can last for days, months, or even years. A person having trouble sleeping may:

- Take a long time to fall asleep
- Wake up many times in the night
- Wake up early and be unable to get back to sleep
- Wake up tired
- Feel very sleepy during the day

There are many causes of insomnia. Some of them can be controlled, but others cannot. Sometimes insomnia may be a sign of other problems. Or, it could be a side effect of a medication or an illness. Often, being unable to sleep becomes a habit. Some people worry about not sleeping even before they get into bed. This may even make insomnia worse.

Older adults who have trouble sleeping may use more over-the-counter sleep aids. Using prescription medicines for a short time might help. But remember, medicines are not a cure for insomnia. Developing healthy habits at bedtime may help you get a good night's sleep.

Sleep Apnea

Sleep apnea is another serious sleep disorder. A person with sleep apnea has short pauses in breathing while sleeping. These pauses may happen many times during the night. If not treated, sleep apnea can lead to other problems such as high blood pressure, stroke or memory loss.

A person can have sleep apnea and not even know it. But loud snoring and gasping for air can keep other people awake. Feeling sleepy during the day and being told about snoring loudly at night could be signs of sleep apnea. It may be necessary to sleep in a position that keeps the airways open.

Sometimes a medical device called Continuous Positive Air Pressure (CPAP), a dental device, or surgery can help.

Movement Disorders

Restless legs syndrome, periodic limb movement disorder and rapid eye movement sleep behavior disorder are common neurological disorders in older adults. These movement disorders can rob a person of needed sleep.

People with restless legs syndrome, or RLS, feel like there is tingling, crawling, or pins and needles in one or both legs. This feeling is worse at night. Moving the legs brings some relief, at least for a short time. RLS tends to run in families.

Periodic limb movement disorder, or PLMD, causes people to jerk and kick their legs every 20 to 40 seconds during sleep. Some people have hundreds of these movements each night, which may result in loss of sleep and feeling tired and sleepy the next day. Medication, warm baths, exercise and learning ways to relax can help.

Rapid eye movement sleep behavior disorder, also known as REM sleep behavior disorder, is another condition that may make it harder to get a good night's sleep.

REM sleep, or rapid eye movement sleep, is the most active stage of sleep when dreaming often occurs. During normal REM sleep, muscles cannot move, so the body stays still. But if a person has REM sleep behavior disorder, muscles can move, and sleep is disrupted.

Alzheimer's Disease and Sleep

Alzheimer's disease often changes a person's sleeping habits. Some people with Alzheimer's disease sleep too much; others do not sleep enough.

Some people wake up many times during the night; others wander or yell at night. A person with Alzheimer's disease is not the only one who loses sleep. Caregivers may have sleepless nights, leaving them tired for the challenges they face during the day.

Getting a Good Night's Sleep

Being older does not automatically mean a person has to feel tired all the time. There are many things to help get a good night's sleep, including:

- Follow a regular sleep schedule. Go to sleep and get up at the same time each day, even on weekends. Try to avoid napping in the late afternoon or evening.
- Develop a bedtime routine. Take time to relax before bedtime each night. Some people watch television, read a book, listen to soothing music, or soak in a warm bath.
- Keep the bedroom dark, not too hot or too cold, and as quiet as possible.
- Have a comfortable mattress, pillow, and enough blankets for the season.
- Exercise at regular times each day but not within three hours of bedtime.
- Make an effort to get outside in the sunlight each day.
- Be careful about eating. Large meals close to bedtime may keep a person awake, but a light snack in the evening can help in the effort to get a good night's sleep.
- Stay away from caffeine late in the day.
- Drink fewer beverages in the evening. Waking up to go to the bathroom breaks up sleep.
- Remember that alcohol will not help a person fall asleep. Even small amounts of alcohol actually make it harder to stay asleep.
- Use your bedroom only for sleeping.
- After turning off the light, take about 20 minutes to fall asleep. If still awake and not drowsy, get out of bed. Go back to bed when drowsy.

Resources

- American Academy of Sleep Medicine: www.aasmnet.org
- American Sleep Apnea Association: www.sleepapnea.org
- National Sleep Foundation: www.sleepfoundation.org
- Restless Legs Syndrome Foundation: www.rls.org

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Aging, part of the United States National Institutes of Health: www.nia.nih.gov.

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