

Sleeping Problems

Most people experience sleep disturbance from time to time. The following are typical forms of sleep disturbance:

- Waking early
- Difficulty getting to sleep for a period of time
- Prolonged, disturbed or light sleep
- Sleep which is interrupted by shock and fear on sudden waking (night terror)
- Sleep which is interrupted by nightmares
- Small amounts of sleep with cat-napping at other times
- Occasional complete absence of sleep.

When you feel you are not getting enough sleep, or that your sleep is disturbed, it can be worrying and leave you feeling tired and unable to cope with the daily demands of your life effectively. But for most people it is usually a temporary state, and there are things that you can do to improve the quality and pattern of your sleep.

General points for better sleep

- Try to eat foods that provide you with the nutrients which encourage sleep. Foods containing melatonin may be helpful. Oats, rice, ginger, tomatoes, bananas and barley all contain melatonin. Oats contain most, barley least.
- Get plenty of exercise and fresh air (though not just before bedtime)
- Keep sleep to limits; don't oversleep. Try to establish a pattern of sleep by going to bed each night and getting up in the morning at around the same time, even if you haven't slept well. It may take a few days for your body to respond to this pattern, but it should help once the pattern is established.
- Avoid long daytime napping – if you sleep for an hour or more during the day or in the evening you can normally expect to take longer getting to sleep, or to sleep less at night.
- Don't magnify your sleepless state, or alarm yourself over it, as this may make it worse. You may go to bed feeling really stressed about whether or not you'll sleep. It may help instead to see your wakeful hours as a time to relax in a warm and comfortable place.
- However, don't toss and turn for hours in bed. Rather than lie there getting more upset because you can't sleep, it can help to get up and/or read, listen to the radio or do light, mindless things until you feel drowsy again.

Pay attention to your night-time routine

By establishing a routine before you go to bed, you are helping your mind to switch off from the day's activity and prepare for sleep. The following suggestions are ones which may help:

- Reduce mental activity two hours before sleep; try to avoid studying and then going straight to bed, because your brain will take a while to 'switch off'. This includes using a laptop or computer games.

- Reduce light levels two hours before sleep: use a lamp rather than a bright overhead light.
- Create a sleeping environment which is free from work and disturbance. Put books and papers away, even if just in a neat pile on your desk.
- Some people find that having a bath or a shower before they go to bed helps them to relax and switch off from the day.
- Take deliberate steps to stop yourself worrying at night. Write concerns down so you can put them out of your head and plan to deal with them in the morning. Making a list just before you settle down to sleep of what you want to remember for the next day means that you don't have to have these things going round and round your mind
- Don't go to bed hungry or too full – some people find that something light, like a banana or a biscuit and/or a warm, milky/non-caffeinated drink helps just before going to bed.
- Avoid caffeine, alcohol and smoking before sleep. They are all stimulants even though they may feel relaxing initially.
- Avoid exercise before bedtime (increases stress hormone responses in many people).
- Go to the toilet before getting into bed to avoid being woken by a full bladder. Don't drink a lot of liquids late at night.
- If you are a person who needs absolute quiet to sleep, ear plugs might be helpful; some people find that a constant low background noise, like music or the radio, helps.
- Have a small range of distractions available for use in the event of being awake for a while: some light reading, a notebook and pencil to jot down things you want to remember in the morning, a radio. However, don't be tempted to use anything with a computer screen as its light will stimulate the brain.
- Make your bed as comfortable as possible, and try to get the temperature right for you. Sometimes a hot water bottle helps if you feel cold in bed or wearing socks in bed to stop your feet getting cold. Or maybe a lighter cover if you feel hot.

If there are issues which are stopping you sleep because you are worrying about them, it may be helpful to talk with someone from the Counselling and Mental Health Service about them, or about your sleep pattern. The Services' web page gives more information and tells you how to make an appointment.

If you think that you would like to talk to someone then please contact the Student Counselling and Mental Health Service via email cmh@worc.ac.uk or phone 01905 54 2832. The Services' web page (www.worc.ac.uk/counselling) gives more information and tells you how to make an appointment.

The Services are located in Woodbury Building on the St John's Campus.

You will find more information and advice on overcoming sleep problems on the following websites:

- www.moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk/sleepproblems.asp
- www.mind.org.uk
- Worcestershire Health Minds NHS Self Help Booklets
<http://www.hacw.nhs.uk/EasySiteWeb/getresource.axd?AssetID=64705&servicetype=Attachment%20>