

# The Importance of SLEEP for the Aging Adult



## What is the problem with sleep?

- Sleep is a necessary part of life and how much rest we get can indicate how we will be able to perform physically and mentally on a daily basis. This is especially important for the older adult. Some people say that as we get older, we do not need as much sleep. However, this is not true. An older adult needs to get sufficient sleep to be able to perform functional daily tasks and engage in occupations. Getting less or more than the suggested amount of sleep has been proven by research to cause functional limitations for the older adult.

## How much sleep does an older adult need?

- Research suggests that the older adult should be getting **between 6 and 8 hours of sleep per night** and try to avoid napping/ sleeping during the day as much as possible.

## Environmental Modifications to Improve Sleep

- **Naturally boost your melatonin levels:** Any artificial lights at night time can decrease your body's production of melatonin, the hormone that is related to sleep. Use low- wattage light bulbs where it is safe to do so in and near your bedroom. Turn off the TV and computer at least one hour before bed.
- **Don't read from a backlit device at night (ex. iPad):** If this is something that you cannot avoid doing, you can make modifications. You can read with blue- light blocking glasses which can be found at certain stores or ordered online (see link below in "other helpful resources"). There is also an option on the iPad and other E-Reader tablets that allow you to turn off the blue light in the background, this

setting is called “night- mode”. You can access this in light display settings.

- **Make sure your bedroom is quiet, dark, and cool:** As we age we can become more sensitive to noise, light, and heat. Keep the blinds shut in the bedroom, use fans at night, and crack the window if the weather allows. If you are sensitive to sound at night, try ear plugs or a sound machine. If you are sensitive to light, try a sleeping mask.
- **Use your bedroom only for sleep:** If you don’t work, watch TV, or use your devices in the bedroom during the day then your brain will associate the bedroom with just sleep. Try to do daily activities in other rooms of the house.
- **Move bedroom clocks out of view:** The background light of clocks at night can disrupt your sleep. Being able to watch the clock at all hours of the night can also cause sleep disturbances.

### **Tips for a Bedtime Routine:**

- **Keep a consistent sleep schedule:** Try to go to bed and wake up at the same times every day, even on weekends. This will keep your body’s sleep schedule consistent.
- **Keep a sleep diary:** If you are having difficulty sleeping keep a diary of times you are sleeping and waking up. Keep record of similar times you are having problems and find solutions. This record can be shared with your doctor/ health professional. Find a link below in “other helpful resources” to free downloadable sleep diary.
- **Block out snoring:** If your snoring or the snoring of your partner is keeping you up at night, try earplugs, a white- noise machines, or even separate bedrooms.
- **Set a “bedtime”:** Set a “bedtime” to the earliest time you feel comfortable going to bed and try not to stay up later than that time.
- **Develop calming bedtime routines:** Try to take a bath/ shower before bed, play music, or practice a relaxation technique. Some techniques for relaxation include progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness meditation, or deep breathing. Using these calming routines before

bed will help you wind down in a natural way. Find links below to a deep breathing technique and a free meditation app you can use before bed in “other helpful resources.”

- **Limit any sleeping aids/ pills if possible:** Sleep aids/ pills tend to have lots of side effects. These are not meant for long term use as they do not address the causes of insomnia and can make it worse in the long run.
- **Sex before bed:** Any forms of intimacy, even hugging, can lead to a restful night of sleep. Try to keep intimacy in the bedroom and part of a night time routine.

### **Tips for Napping:**

- Try to avoid napping during the day as much as possible. However, if you aren't feeling alert or rested you may need a nap to get through the rest of the day.
  - **Keep naps as short as possible.** Even a nap for 5 minutes can improve alertness. Try to keep naps 15- 45 minutes long. Anything longer than this may make you too groggy.
  - **Nap early in the day,** napping too late may disrupt your nighttime sleep.
  - **Try to nap in a comfortable environment** preferably with limited light and noise.

### **Changing Diet to Improve Sleep:**

- **Limit caffeine late in the day:** Avoid any coffee, tea, soda, and chocolate late in the day. These can make you stay up late and disrupt your sleep.
- **Avoid alcohol before bedtime:** Although it seems that alcohol makes you sleepy, it will actually disrupt your sleep. Try to avoid excessive drinking.
- **Satisfy hunger before bed:** Have a light snack before bed that is low in sugar such as cereal or yogurt.
- **Cut down on sugary foods:** Eating a diet that is high in sugar and refined carbs can cause restlessness and pull you out of the deep,

restorative stages of sleep. Try to avoid these types of food, especially later in the day.

- **Avoid big meals or spicy foods before bedtime:** Big meals or any spicy foods can lead to indigestion and discomfort in sleep. Try to eat a modest- sized dinner at least 3 hours before bedtime.
- **Minimize liquid intake before sleep:** Limit what you drink within the hour and a half before bedtime to limit waking up to use the bathroom during the night.

### **Exercise to Improve Sleep:**

- Exercise and aerobic activity releases chemicals in your body that promote more restful sleep. Even if you have mobility limitations, there are many activities you can do to prepare for a good night's sleep. Here are some examples of activities you can try to improve sleep:
  - Swimming/ water exercises
  - Dancing
  - Lawn Bowling/ Bocce
  - Golfing
  - Cycling
  - Running/ Walking

### **Reduce Mental Stress and Promote Relaxation**

- Built- up stress and anxiety during the day can interfere with sleep at night. Try to let go of thoughts and worries when it is time for sleep. Make your goal relaxation, not sleep. Try some of these helpful tips:
  - Keep a journal to record worries
  - Keep a to- do list. Check off completed tasks and list future goals. Let them go out of your mind before bedtime.
  - Listen to calming music
  - Read a book that makes you feel relaxed
  - Get a massage from a friend or partner
  - Use a relaxation technique or deep breathing before bed

- Seek opportunities to talk about problems with a trusted friend or therapist

### **Waking up in the middle of the night...**

- Don't stress, focus on relaxation not sleep.
- If you have been awake for more than 20 minutes, do a quiet, non-stimulating activity such as reading a book. Get out of bed but keep the lights dim and avoid any screens.
- Postpone worrisome thoughts- If you have something that is worrying you in the middle of the night, write it down on paper and try to postpone worrying until the next day.

### **What health professionals can you talk to about sleep?**

- If you are having any complications with sleeping and would like to seek professional advice, here is a list of healthcare workers that can help you:
  - **Primary Care Physician** (family doctor)
  - **Sleep Medicine Specialist** (experts at diagnosing and managing sleep related conditions)
  - **Neurologist** (experts on the brain and hormones, can diagnose why you are experiencing sleeping problems based on chemical imbalance)
  - **Psychologist** (talk to a therapist to work on sleep problems from a behavioral and mental standpoint)
  - **Psychiatrist** (physician who specializes in diagnosis and treatment of mental health disorders and CAN prescribe drugs)
  - **Occupational Therapy** (can train you in techniques to help improve your sleep and functional abilities)
  - **Alternative Medicine Practitioners** (those who practice yoga, meditation, relaxation etc. and can train you on these techniques)
  - **Dentist** (can help with any oral devices needed to improve sleep apnea conditions)

### **How will improved sleep increase your quality of life?**

- Not only is getting a good night of rest good for your health, but it does wonders for your energy level. As we age, our bodies grow

weaker and certain tasks become more exhausting. Making sure that we get enough quality sleep will improve concentration and energy levels to allow for daily task participation. A good night of sleep will help you keep your mind sharp for your memory and important work/ life roles that you need to be able to participate fully in.

### **Other Helpful Resources:**

- Follow this link to purchase a pair of blue- light blocking glasses from Amazon Prime. Wearing these will allow you to use your phone/ iPad at night because they block blue light:  
[https://www.amazon.com/ANRRI-Blocking-Eyestrain-Lightweight-Eyeglasses/dp/B07GRPXNX4/ref=zg\\_bs\\_17919093011\\_2?\\_encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=86TSQVCNQJ2YHGNRWK82](https://www.amazon.com/ANRRI-Blocking-Eyestrain-Lightweight-Eyeglasses/dp/B07GRPXNX4/ref=zg_bs_17919093011_2?_encoding=UTF8&psc=1&refRID=86TSQVCNQJ2YHGNRWK82)
- Follow this link to a free downloadable sleep diary. There are many options if you google “printable sleep diary” on your internet browser. This one is a straightforward questionnaire that will help you understand your sleep patterns:  
<https://www.nhs.uk/livewell/insomnia/documents/sleepdiary.pdf>
- Follow this link to learn the 4- 7- 8 Breath Relaxation Exercise. This is a type of deep breathing that can promote relaxation before bed: <https://www.cordem.org/globalassets/files/academic-assembly/2017-aa/handouts/day-three/biofeedback-exercises-for-stress-2---fernances-j.pdf>
- Follow this link to a FREE downloadable app for your smartphone called “Insight Timer”. This is an app for meditation and provides calming music/ sounds for bedtime and other times of the day. Go to the “sleep” section of the app to access bedtime sounds. To download on apple click this link: <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/insight-timer-meditation-app/id337472899>  
To download on Android click this link:  
[https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.spotlightsix.zentimerlite2&hl=en\\_US](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.spotlightsix.zentimerlite2&hl=en_US)

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