

SLEEP –

Your questions answered

Professor Gaby Badre, Consultant in Sleep Medicine and Clinical Neurosciences at The London Clinic answers some common questions about sleep related issues.

Q What is the ideal number of hours' sleep people should try and get every night?

Individuals need different amounts of sleep. There are short sleepers and long sleepers. However, most epidemiological studies have shown that generally people need between seven and eight hours sleep a night. Of key importance is not how many hours sleep at night you have but how many hours sleep you have during 24 hours.

If you are unable to get enough sleep in one stretch at night, it is possible to 'catch-up' on sleep during the day by taking a power nap.

Q Is it good practice to take a nap or siesta in the afternoon?

It is a good idea to take a small nap in the afternoon to help you get through the day and evening ahead, especially if your night sleep is not enough or of bad quality. However, this should be no longer than 20 minutes and at least six to eight hours before your bedtime so as not to disrupt your body rhythm and night's sleep by removing the sleep pressure. Studies have shown that the most effective nap should be longer than five minutes but shorter than 20–30 minutes (to avoid entering into deep sleep).

Q How can we make sure we get a good night's sleep?

What you do during the day greatly affects your body's circadian pattern and therefore how you sleep at night. It is really important to unwind properly at the end of every day to make sure you get a good night's sleep.

Some top tips include:

- Get up and go to bed at the same time every day, including weekends and avoid spending an unnecessary amount of time lying in bed, i.e. in the morning – this will get your body into a set rhythm and build up a sleep pressure
- Try to remain awake during the day and do not snooze in the evenings. If you do find yourself in need of a 'power nap', ensure it lasts no longer than 20 minutes and is at least six to eight hours before you are due to go to bed

- Maintain regular eating habits during the day and do not smoke, eat heavily, consume alcohol, caffeine or any other form of stimulants at least two hours before you plan to go to sleep
- Try not to do anything to increase your mental or physical stimulation before bedtime, especially if you have a tendency to have sleep problems i.e. do not run or go to the gym for at least four hours before you plan to go to bed – increase in body temperature will only make it more difficult to fall asleep
- Have a few 'slots' during the day when you switch off your mobile phone
- If you seldom feel refreshed in the morning, check the quality of your night's sleep – you could be a snorer, for which help is available
- If you cannot manage to sleep enough during the night, try to take a couple of short naps for a few minutes during the day

Q What are the effects of 'broken sleep'?

Keeping to a regular sleep pattern seven days a week, 365 days a year will help ensure you feel more alert and refreshed. Chronic, irregular sleeping patterns, e.g. in shift workers, can have a negative effect on health and mood and potentially lead to depression and anxiety. Your physical well-being could also suffer as a result of poor diet and lack of exercise and some people could become more prone to making errors at work.

Q Is quality of sleep affected by frequent nightmares or vivid dreams?

Nightmares can be brought on by a disturbing or emotional event, or increased stress levels at work. Dreams occur mainly in the REM (rapid eye movement) part of sleep, which is when you are in a light stage of sleep – the brain seems awake but the body sleeps. Depending on the nature of the dream people may suddenly awake, disturbing the sleeping pattern. Nightmares activate the autonomic nervous system, yielding to sweating, palpitations, higher blood pressure and other unpleasant body reactions. Recurrent nightmares may also make the person feel anxious about falling asleep.

Q Is it true that your diet can affect the quality of your sleep?

Eating heavy or spicy meals late in the day can affect sleep e.g. heavy digestion and heartburn, with the additional risk of nightmares. Some nutrients can trigger a mild allergic reaction, e.g. swelling of the mucosae in the nose yielding to breathing disorders, and liquid intake can result in an urge to urinate. Too much sugar at night develops a surge of insulin, with a risk of secondary sugar depression. Sleep is also affected by a person's alcohol, caffeine or stimulant intake.

Q Are there any better positions to sleep in than others?

There is no 'ideal' sleeping position since we frequently move and change positions when we sleep. Very early on we acquire a particular position when we go to bed which helps us to fall asleep – a position which gives us a feeling of security. How we sleep depends also on the body's morphology, joints and general health. Sleeping on the back increases the risk of snoring and breathing disorders and can be inconvenient for obese people. Adequate sleeping surfaces are essential for a good sleep.

Q Is the age-old adage 'early to bed, early to rise' true?

Going to bed early doesn't necessarily mean you will wake up early.

Our daily sleep/wake cycle has a sinusoidal pattern, which means there are optimal times for falling asleep and waking up. In a normal situation, deep sleep (the most restoring part of sleep) occurs in the first part of sleep. Before the introduction of TV in our lives and other activities that keep us awake late at night, people used to have a regular pattern of going to bed early and waking up relatively early after their seven to eight hours of sleep. However in our current 24-hour society, people are often sleep deprived and go to bed at irregular times, therefore disturbing their sleep pattern. Deep sleep, instead of being concentrated is fragmented and spread across the night. As a result, the sleep pattern is disturbed and you can wake up feeling tired and un-refreshed.

Q Can I catch up on sleep over the weekend if I have had a really busy week?

Changing your sleeping habits over the weekend might make you feel rested, however, it could have a negative effect on your sleeping patterns over the following days. Rather than staying in bed longer in the morning, it is far better to catch up on sleep by taking a short nap during the day or getting to bed earlier the next evening, so your normal waking time remains the same as it is during the week.

Q Why is technology and today's 24hr culture affecting our sleeping patterns?

We are becoming increasingly dependent on technology for work, rest and play – it is around us constantly. For example, we now keep items such as TVs, laptops and mobile phones in the bedroom. Traditionally we have had a natural beginning and end to the day – called the circadian rhythm, but in our wired-up culture our minds are frequently over-stimulated by the time we go to bed. Sleep problems and deprivation cause day problems and can have consequences on our health and in terms of bad decision-making and potentially causing accidents.

Q What is the ideal environment to ensure a good night's sleep?

To ensure a good night's sleep the bedroom should be associated with rest and calm, not stress and tension. There are a number of factors to consider when creating the perfect bedroom environment, these are: noise levels, light, temperature – the ideal being 18-20°C, humidity, security – if you feel safe in your home you will sleep better, clocks that illuminate, décor – selecting neutral or pastel colours that feel calm and restful and, above all, a good quality mattress and bedding. The bed is one of the most important pieces of furniture in the house!

The London Clinic is located on Harley Street, in the heart of the capital's medical community, and is internationally renowned for its medical and surgical expertise.

The sleep service at The London Clinic responds to the growing need for the diagnosis and treatment of various sleep disorders. The main specialities and conditions treated include: clinical neurophysiology, sleep medicine and chronobiological (irregular day/night rhythms) disorders.

If you would like to put any alternative questions on sleep to Professor Gaby Badre to appear in print, please contact The London Clinic Press Office on

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