

Aging and Sleep

Getting the amount of sleep you need is a vital part of good health at any age. This may become more challenging in midlife and beyond. As you get older, you may find it more difficult to fall asleep or stay asleep, or you may feel sleepy earlier in the evening and wake up earlier in the morning. These and other changes can lead to poor sleep quality.

Fortunately, scientists continue to learn about the sleep needs of people in their 50s and up. Whether you get too much sleep or too little, you can take steps to get the amount of sleep you need to feel rested and refreshed every day.



How Much Sleep Do You Need?

People over 65 need the same amount of sleep that younger adults do in order to function at their best. Extensive research suggests that for most people, that means between 7 and 9 hours a night. But older adults often find it harder to get the sleep they need to stay healthy.

Some older people get less rest than they need because they think that chronic sleep difficulties are a normal part of aging. This isn't true. Many healthy people over 65 have few or no sleep problems. At any age, difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep can be a sign of a health problem that needs attention.

Ways That Sleep Difficulties May Affect Older People

Getting too little or too much sleep can affect you in many ways. The most common effects of sleep difficulties include:

- Attention or memory problems
- A depressed mood
- Excessive daytime sleepiness
- Greater chance of accidents, including falls or car crashes
- A lack of energy
- Decreased immune function

Sleep difficulties can also lead to less satisfaction with your emotional wellbeing, because feeling tired makes it harder to enjoy many of life's pleasures. And they are associated with chronic health problems like diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease, according to the Cleveland Clinic.

Common Causes of Poor Sleep After the Age Of 65

Older people often have trouble sleeping for the same reasons as anyone, such as difficulty coping with stress or anxiety. People over 65 may also sleep poorly due to additional factors that become more common with age. Older adults may:

Have chronic pain that keeps them awake. Common medical problems in later life include arthritis, depression, heart disease, and gastroesophageal reflux disorder. These conditions may interfere with sleep if they cause discomfort that goes untreated.

Take medications that affect sleep. Adults over 65 take more than twice as many prescription medications as younger ones, and the number rises with age. Some medications have side effects that may cause older people to sleep too much or too little or otherwise have trouble regulating their sleep habits.

Need to get up during the night to go to the bathroom. The bladder holds less fluid as you age, so many older people have to get up at night to use the bathroom. Age also increases the risk of developing conditions that can lead to more frequent urination, including chronic kidney failure or enlarged prostate.

Have sleep disorders. Sleep disorders can occur at any age, but the risk for some of them rises with age. These include obstructive sleep apnea, a potentially serious condition in which breathing stops and starts during sleep. Older adults also face a higher risk of insomnia (difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep), and restless leg syndrome (RLS). RLS typically occurs at night and involves an uncontrollable urge to move your legs, as well as other symptoms, such as pain and itching.

Experience a lack of activity during the day. Many people engage in less physical activity as they get older. If this happens, they may not be tired enough to fall asleep.

Have poor nutrition. Older people may have a poor diet, especially if they live alone. They may have disabilities that make it hard to go shopping, or they may live alone and skip meals if they feel that eating alone is less enjoyable than sharing a meal with others. Going to bed hungry or consuming alcohol at bedtime can also affect the ability to fall asleep or stay asleep.

Tips On Getting a Good Night's Sleep in Later Life

Sleeping well can improve the quality of life. Consider the following:

Make it a top health priority to get a good night's sleep every night. Remember that persistent sleep difficulties are not normal at any age.

Develop a sleep routine that will work for you at this stage of life. Reevaluate any sleep habits that leave you feeling tired or groggy. Look for new routines that will make it easier for you to feel refreshed and energetic throughout the day.

Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day. Doing the same things in the same order at bedtime can help you establish a dependable routine for sleeping and waking. Your routine might include taking a relaxing bath, reading a book, or listening to soft music. If you do the same things every day, they will become triggers that tell your body it's time to sleep.

Sleep in a safe and relaxing place. Keep your bedroom cool, dark, and quiet, and consider getting blackout curtains if bright morning light wakes you up too early. In case you do awaken through the night, take any necessary steps to reduce the risk of nighttime falls. Remove or secure loose rugs. Make sure you can easily reach bedside and other lamps and add nightlights in the halls.

Watch what—and when—you eat. Stay away from caffeine and heavy, greasy foods late in the day. Try to finish your evening meal several hours before you go to bed, and avoid foods that you know don't agree with you and may keep you awake. Limit any caffeine consumption to at least 6 hours before bedtime. Don't try to relax at bedtime by smoking or drinking alcohol, either of which may interfere with sleep when the initial relaxing effect wears off.

Avoid TV and other electronic activities just before bed, as they may be overly stimulating. If you watch television to unwind, remember that potentially disturbing programs—such as news reports or crime shows—can make it hard to fall asleep. Try watching the news earlier in the evening. Avoid checking email, text messages, and social media at bedtime. Also, light from e-readers and other electronic devices inhibit your ability to fall asleep and need to be turned off about one hour before bedtime.

Exercise in the morning or late afternoon. While physical activity can improve sleep quality, try to finish your exercise routine or strenuous chores at least 3 hours before bedtime. These can keep you awake if your body hasn't had enough time to wind down.

Let people know your routines. Tell family and friends your sleep routine; let them know when it's OK and not OK to call you.

Deal with difficult or stressful tasks earlier in the day. If you dislike certain activities, such as paying bills, do them earlier in the day. It may be harder to fall asleep if you handle challenging tasks before bedtime.

Limit daytime naps. As people age, they also spend less time in the deepest and most restorative stages of sleep. In addition, sleep is more fragmented, which may contribute to it being less refreshing. If you have trouble getting to sleep, it is best not to nap because it will inhibit your ability to sleep at night. If you cannot avoid napping, do not nap for more than 20 minutes, because you may fall into a deep sleep and have more trouble waking up. Napping after 3 p.m. may also make it harder to fall asleep at night.

Of note, taking an excessive number of daytime naps can be a sign of depression, which can occur at any age. Be aware that if an older person seems to nap much more than others, or if the naps are taking the place of other healthy activities, they may have depression. Encourage an older person who seems to sleep excessively to talk with a doctor about possible causes.

Try to get some natural light for at least a few minutes each afternoon. Staying indoors all day can make it harder to benefit from the natural cycles of light and darkness that help your body know when it's time to sleep. Going outdoors also gives you a chance to enjoy physical activities that can help you sleep better, such as walking, riding a bike, gardening, or doing gentle stretching exercises.

Don't try to force yourself to sleep. Trying to make yourself sleep can have the opposite effect. If you can't get to sleep within about 20 minutes of going to bed or if you wake up in the middle of the night and can't get back to sleep, get up and do something relaxing until you feel sleepy again. Try reading or listening to soothing music.

Take medications as prescribed. Some prescription or over-the-counter drugs can affect sleep, either because they contain caffeine or for other reasons. Tell your doctor if a medication recommended for you has affected your sleep. Your doctor may be able to prescribe another medication that would work as well without keeping you awake.

Sleep problems can have a variety of causes. Some are temporary and may go away on their own. Others result from physical or emotional health conditions that require medical help. If you have sleep problems that last longer than a week, talk with your doctor. A doctor can help you identify and treat the problem so you can get the rest you need to feel your best every day.

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