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Top Tips for Sleep

Sleep problems are very common and affect people in different ways. There is no “right” amount of sleep as this varies between people and across the life-span.

Sleep problems can occur for a number of reasons: as a result of age; medical reasons; emotional reasons; unhelpful surroundings; disruptive sleep routines. There are different sorts of sleep problems; getting to sleep; staying asleep; waking too early; poor quality sleep. It is also possible to think that you have a sleep problem when in fact you are still getting enough sleep but it is different from what you expect.

Overcoming Your Sleep Problem

One of the first steps in overcoming sleep difficulties is finding out any possible causes and trying to look for solutions. Is sleeping your main problem, or is there another problem which may be causing you to have difficulty sleeping, e.g. worry? If there is another problem, is there anything you can do about the problem?

You may find that getting help in another area has a knock-on effect on your sleeping. Your sleeping may well right itself if you can solve some of your other problems. Even so, you may have got into some “bad habits” which are not helping you get off to sleep. The following simple checklist of good sleep habits may help.

Good Sleep Habits

- **Don't worry** – try not to worry about not getting enough sleep – it may be that you are getting enough, but it's just less than you expect. Don't take naps during the day to catch up, this will affect your natural sleep rhythm and only add to your problem.
- **Surroundings** – Go through this basic check list and see whether there are any simple changes you can make:
 - Noise (too noisy, too quiet?)
 - Light (too light, too dark?)
 - Comfort of mattress (too hard, too soft?)
 - Temperature of room (too hot, too cold?)
 - Is your partner (or lack of one) keeping you awake?
- **Food and drink** – anything that contains caffeine, taken near to bedtime will reduce the quality of sleep. Examples include coffee, tea, hot chocolate,

cola and chocolate. It is best not to have any of these things within four hours of bedtime.

- **Cigarettes** – smoking last thing at night can keep you awake as nicotine is a stimulant. If you do smoke, try to have your last cigarette at least four hours before bedtime.
- **Medicines and other drugs** – some drugs can affect sleep because they are stimulants. Check with your doctor if your medicines can affect sleep. Sleeping tablets, whilst they can help in the short term, often cause sleep problems as they interfere with the quality of sleep and can alter sleep patterns. They should only be taken for very short periods. You can discuss this with your GP.
- **Alcohol** – whilst people often feel sleepy after drinking a lot of alcohol, the quality of sleep is affected. It is best to avoid drinking large amounts of alcohol close to bedtime if you are having sleep problems.

- **Consistency** – going to bed and getting up at roughly the same time is helpful to set your natural body clock.
- **Pre-sleep routine** – try to use the hour before going to bed to unwind and prepare for sleep (e.g. have a bath and get into pyjamas).
- **Tiredness** – this may seem obvious but do not go to bed until you feel sleepy.
- **Activity** – gradually increase your daytime activity and exercise, but don't exercise too near bedtime.
- **Get up** – If you have not fallen asleep within 30 minutes – get up and have a malty drink. Listen to relaxing music, read a relaxing book or watch something boring on TV until you feel sleepy.
- **Bed for sleep** – make sure your bed is associated with sleep. For example, don't watch TV, eat, and talk on the telephone in bed. The only exception to this is making love which can in fact help (and certainly seems to induce sleep in men!)

These simple ideas really can improve your sleep but they take time. Please be patient, your hard work will pay off although it can take many weeks to develop new sleep habits.

Sources of Support

If you would like further support for any of these issues you can find this from the following services:

- **Sleep Matters**

Tel: 020 8994 9874 (each evening 6pm – 8pm)

www.medicaladvisoryservice.org.uk

Medical Advisory Service, P.O. Box 3087, London, W4 4ZP.

Provides telephone advice and resources concerning sleep problems.

- **The Sleep Council**

Helpline: 0800 018 7923

Tel: 0845 058 4595

www.sleepcouncil.org.uk

High Corn Mill, Chapel Hill, Skipton, North Yorkshire, BD23 1NL

Provides helpline, information and resources on improving sleep.

- **Useful books**

The insomnia kit: practical advice for a good night's sleep -Chris Idzikowski - NewLeaf 1999

Contains illustrated book, 28-day sleep assessment diary and 60 minute audio tape with relaxation exercises.

Overcoming Insomnia and Sleep Problems - Colin A Espie - Robinson London 2006

A self-help guide using cognitive behavioural techniques.

- Your GP (you may be referred to the surgery's counselling service)
- Leigh Bodilly, Velindre Patient and Carer Information and Support Co-ordinator: For information on support services in your local area – 029 20196132
- Your Consultant or Clinical Nurse Specialist can provide you information about the services available to you at Velindre Cancer Centre.

This leaflet was written by health professionals. The information contained in this leaflet is evidence based. It has been approved by doctors, nurses and patients. It is reviewed and updated every 2 years.

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