

COVID-19: Sleep & Anxiety – Tips to getting a good nights sleep.

COVID-19 has brought unprecedented changes which have affected many of us so quickly. It is understandable that the importance of sleep may not be at the top of our priorities; but as we adjust to stay-at-home guidelines and try to remain healthy in a time of such uncertainty, focusing on sleeping well can bring many positive benefits to our overall wellbeing.

Good quality sleep is critical to both our physical and mental health and the effective functioning of our immune system. It also aids our emotional wellness and can have positive impacts on stress, depression, and anxiety.

You may have suffered from Insomnia or had sleeping problems before the COVID-19 pandemic, or this may be the first time you are experiencing difficulty with sleeping. Unfortunately the pandemic may have created a variety of new challenges for us, which in turn can affect our anxiety levels, our sleeping patterns and the quality of sleep we are able to get.

The Sleep Foundation advises that the challenges which may cause an adverse effect to our sleep include:

- Disruption to our daily life and usual routines
- Anxiety and worry
- Depression and Isolation
- Family and Work stress
- Excess screen time
- Stress-related fatigue

Understanding Sleep:

Sleep expert Dr Lindsay Browning explains that sleep is controlled by our circadian rhythm, which is our internal 24 hour clock. This helps us be alert during the day and sleepy at night. It is usually regulated by daily cues such as exposure to daylight, when we eat our meals, when we exercise and other things. When we stay indoors for a long period of time, we lose many of these cues. For example, especially due to social distancing and isolation we may not go outside to get daylight, making our circadian rhythm less robust. Also, if we are not as physically active during the day and eating our meals at different times, our circadian rhythm may not know the difference between day and night as clearly. In addition, when we experience depression (as many people may be feeling low due to the current COVID-19 situation), this can be associated with insomnia (not sleeping well) or hypersomnia (sleeping too much).

It is therefore really important to ensure that we establish a routine at home to give our bodies a sense of normality, which in turn can promote a consistent sleep schedule. Sleep-specific aspects of your daily schedule should include:

- **Wake-Up Time:** Set your alarm, avoid using the snooze button and have a fixed time to start each day.
- **Wind-Down Time:** This is an important time to relax and get ready for bed. It can involve things like light reading, stretching, and meditating along with preparations for bed like putting on pyjamas and brushing your teeth. Given the stress of the coronavirus pandemic, it is wise to give yourself a little extra wind-down time each night.
- **Bedtime:** Pick a consistent time to actually turn out the lights and try to fall asleep.

In addition to time spent sleeping and getting ready for bed, it can be helpful to incorporate steady routines that provide us with cues throughout the day, including:

- Showering and getting dressed even if you aren't leaving the house.
- Eating meals at the same time each day.
- Blocking off specific time periods for work, breaks and exercise.

Follow these basic tips for getting a good night's sleep:

- **Keep regular hours** - Going to bed and getting up at roughly the same time, all the time, will programme your body to sleep better.
- **Create a restful sleeping environment** - Your bedroom should be kept for rest and sleep. It should be neither too hot, nor too cold, and as quiet and dark as possible.
- **Make sure your bed is comfortable** - It's difficult to get deep, restful sleep on one that's too soft, too hard, too small or too old.
- **Take more exercise (where possible)** - Regular exercise such as walking or home workouts can help relieve the day's stresses and strains. But not too close to bedtime or it may keep you awake!
- **Cut down on stimulants** - such as caffeine in tea or coffee, especially in the evening. They interfere with falling asleep and prevent deep sleep. Have a hot milky drink or herbal tea instead.
- **Don't over-indulge** - Too much food or alcohol, especially late at night just before bedtime, can play havoc with sleep patterns.
- **Avoid smoking** - Yes, it's bad for sleep, too! Smokers take longer to fall asleep, wake more often and often experience more sleep disruption.
- **Try to relax before going to bed** - Have a warm bath, listen to some quiet music or do some yoga to help relax your mind and body.
- **Make jobs lists** - Deal with worries or a heavy workload by making lists of things to be tackled the next day.
- **Switch off devices at least an hour before bed** - Many people are also affected by the blue light emitted from laptops, tablets and smartphones and can be addicted to playing games, scrolling through social media, or watching videos close to bedtime.
- **If you can't sleep** - don't spend more than 20 minutes trying to get to sleep; get up and do something relaxing until you feel sleepy again – then go back to bed.

If you are experiencing problems sleeping and feel you may need some support, you can contact Care first. Care first is a leading provider of confidential, professional counselling, information and advice services. All employees are eligible to use Care first, our services include; telephone counselling, information services and online support. Call Care first on the Freephone number provided by your organisation and you can speak to a professional in confidence.

Useful Links for more tips and information:

- www.carefirst-lifestyle.co.uk
- <https://www.sleepfoundation.org/sleep-guidelines-covid-19-isolation>
- <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/how-to-get-to-sleep/>
- <https://troublesleeping.co.uk/>