

The importance of sleep during COVID-19

Why it matters and how you can get enough of it

A pandemic existed across the world before COVID-19 emerged to disrupt our lives. It has been slowly growing, and is known to affect between 25 – 30 per cent of people. It is responsible for significant adverse health and social outcomes, and comes at enormous economic cost to society. This pandemic is sleeplessness. We also know that the COVID-19 pandemic has made it more difficult for some people to get good sleep, either because of anxiety, stress or extended work hours disrupting sleep. The good news about the sleeplessness pandemic is that unlike COVID-19 there are many available ways to overcome it, and help for people to get more and better sleep.

Why is sleep important

Sleep is critical to mental, physical and emotional well-being;

- Physically our bodies renew during sleep; hair, fingernails and skin cells grow, the body's immune system is boosted (which is particularly important during the COVID-19 pandemic), protective immune cells look for cells that are developing abnormally and get rid of them, our brain cleans itself of toxins.
- Most of these activities *only* occur during sleep, so insufficient sleep means these systems are not as effective as they should be, leaving the body more prone to injury, disease and cancer, and probably conditions such as Alzheimer's dementia.
- During sleep our brain lays down memories of things learned during the day, files information away to be recalled later, and processes the emotional impacts of the day so they are easier to deal with later.
- Poor sleep means we don't retain what we have learnt, meaning we can lose up to 40 per cent of information learnt in the day, and it cannot be recalled, except by learning it again.
- Our brain also undergoes sophisticated processing of information, layering information together that allows us to better solve problems and to see "the bigger picture". It is refreshed, so the day after a good sleep we are better able to solve problems, make decisions, work with complex material, see more options, maintain motivation, and because of the emotional benefit of sleep, we are less likely to be irritable, uncommunicative, depressed or anxious.
- Sleep is a sophisticated, powerful, potent (and legal) performance enhancer!

Why can't I get a good night's sleep?

So what stops people getting good sleep?

- One of the most common reasons, and one that is the easiest to fix, is the *choice* we make on how much time we allow for sleep. Choosing to allow at least 8.5 – 9.5 hours for sleep means you are one step closer to getting enough sleep for optimal health. Most people need between 7.5 - 9 hours sleep per night, and allowing for time to fall asleep and the occasional wake time during the night means you may need longer than this in bed.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• There are other reasons that prevent good sleep. A bedroom that is not set up for good sleep, young children waking and needing attention in the night, medical sleep disorders, pain, worry and anxiety, overuse of caffeine or alcohol and some medications that inhibit sleep can all be causes for poor sleep. Working shift work and trying to sleep in the daytime instead of the night can also cause sleep disruption, as can travelling across time zones (jet lag).• The COVID-19 pandemic has added another challenge to getting good sleep. Some people are working longer hours, especially if their job involves responding to the pandemic, or working late hours to juggle child care, work and domestic duties, therefore reducing the time available to sleep. Some people may be experiencing anxiety or stress related to the impacts of the pandemic, and therefore finding it harder to sleep. There is specific advice on getting better sleep during the pandemic in the Further Resources section, and support material for those experiencing anxiety and stress in the Thrive toolkit.
Getting better sleep	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Once having made the decision that you would like better sleep, it is useful to consider what it is that is preventing you getting good sleep now.• A sleep diary (see <i>Further resources</i>) can help to identify what it is that may be impacting your sleep. Of the factors that can result in poor sleep, the most common one is choice, not allowing enough time in bed for sufficient sleep. This means making a decision to forego some of the other activities that you may be doing instead of sleep, such as social media, watching TV, surfing the net, going out to socialise etc.• Although choosing to sleep instead may seem difficult at first. The improved well-being, mental agility and better health that comes from better sleep can give you the motivation to continue to get enough time for sleep.• Next is the bedroom, it needs to be cool, dark and quiet for sufficient sleep. If your time in bed is sufficient, and your bedroom is well set up but you are still having trouble sleeping, there are many additional hints and tips to help you sleep, including getting exercise (although not within at least 1 hour before bedtime), getting daytime light, avoiding caffeine in the 6-8 hours before bed, avoiding screens (computer, tablet, phone and TV) too close to bedtime.• Finally, there are also many hints on what to do when you are in bed, tossing and turning and waiting for sleep to come. Some strategies to calm your mind, and help you drop off to sleep are also included in the tip sheets below. See <i>Further resources</i> below for detailed advice on how to get better sleep.
Reach out	<p>If you need further support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Contact the Employee Assistance Program as they have information that can assist with better sleep.• Contact your doctor, you may have a medical sleep disorder, or be on medication that impacts your sleep, and your doctor can help you manage these situations.



Further resources

[Sleep Health Foundation Fact Sheets](#);

- Getting Good Sleep During the COVID-19 Pandemic
- Ten Tips for a Good Night's Sleep
- Understanding and Helping Poor Sleep
- Technology and Sleep
- Anxiety and Sleep
- Caffeine and Sleep
- Sleep diary

EAP Better Sleep Programme;

[Better Sleep Programme, provided by BSS](#) (available in South Australia, Western Australia and Melbourne)

TED Talks;

- [Matthew Walker, Sleep is your Superpower](#)
- [Arianna Huffington: How to Succeed: Get More Sleep](#)
- [Jeff Iliff: One More Reason to Get a Good Night's Sleep](#)
- [Wendy Troxel: Why School Should Start Later for Teens](#)

Books;

- Why We Sleep: The New Science of Sleep and Dreams. Matthew Walker, 2017 Penguin Random House, UK
- The Secret World of Sleep: The Surprising Science of the Mind at Rest. Penelope Lewis 2013 Palgrave Macmillan
- Internal Time: Chronotypes, Social Jet Lag and Why You're So Tired. Till Roenneberg 2012 Harvard University Press, USA
- Eat, Move, Sleep. Tom Rath 2013 Missionday, USA