



Sleep Changes as Adults Age

MU Patient Education Series

Most adults need 7 or 8 hours of sleep each night to feel fully alert during the day. As we get older, we might have more trouble sleeping. There are many different types of sleep disorders. Many people have more than one sleep problem. Lack of good quality of sleep leads to more than just feeling tired. Sleepiness interferes with your memory in people of all ages, and even personality changes.

COMMON SLEEP DISORDER SYMPTOMS:

- Excessive daytime sleepiness
- Daytime fatigue
- Short periods of restless sleep
- Snoring
- Difficulty falling asleep
- Difficulty staying asleep
- Inability to breathe when asleep
- Uncomfortable leg movements in sleep
- Irritability/Depressed mood
- Sexual dysfunction
- Unusual behaviors in sleep (i.e. night terrors, sleepwalking, seizures)

WHAT SLEEP CHANGES ARE COMMON IN OLDER ADULTS?

Older adults might get sleepy earlier in the evening. Older adults may have insomnia, which makes it hard to fall asleep when they go to bed or stay asleep all night. They might wake up very early in the morning and not be able to go back to sleep.



WHAT CAUSES SLEEP PROBLEMS?

A number of things can cause sleep problems. By the time an adult is over 65 years old, his or her sleep-wake cycle may not seem to work as well as it did when he or she was younger.

- Lifestyle habits (such as smoking and drinking alcohol or caffeinated drinks)
- Illness
- Pain
- Medications
- Inability to breathe when sleeping
- Abnormal movements during sleep

WHAT IS SLEEP APNEA?

Sleep apnea is a disorder in which a person stops breathing repeatedly while asleep. People who have sleep apnea usually snore very loudly. They stop breathing for 10 to 30 seconds during sleep and then start breathing again with a gasp. This can happen hundreds of times in a single night. When this happens it interrupts your sleep.

TREATMENT OPTIONS FOR SLEEP APNEA:

- Lose weight
- Quit smoking
- Stop drinking alcohol
- Stop using sleep medicines
- Wear a nasal cannula or mask during the night to keep their airways open
- Surgery

If you are experiencing difficulty sleeping, think about the cause and take notes. If the problem persists for more than a few weeks, or if you experience discomfort as a result of the insomnia, talk to your doctor about your symptoms. Be sure and bring with you a record of your sleep, fatigue levels throughout the day, and any other symptoms you might be having.

HOW DO I COPE?

No matter what the problem is, it is important to establish and maintain healthy sleep habits. Here are some tips that will help you sleep better.



At night:

- Establish a regular bedtime routine and a regular sleep-wake schedule
- Do not eat or drink too much close to bedtime
- Create a sleep-promoting environment that is dark, cool and comfortable
- Avoid disturbing noises – consider a bedside fan or white-noise machine to block out disturbing sounds

During the day:

- Consume less or no caffeine, particularly late in the day
- Avoid alcohol and nicotine, especially close to bedtime
- Exercise, but not within three hours before bedtime
- Avoid naps, particularly in the late afternoon or evening
- Keep a sleep diary

DISCLAIMER:

Medline does not practice medicine, and no information presented on this website is medical advice or intended as a substitute for the advice of a physician. All information on this website concerning medical conditions is from publicly available sources.