

How do I sleep better?

1. Introduction

This self-help guide is intended for people with mild-to-moderate mental health issues.

If you're feeling distressed, in a state of despair, suicidal or in need of emotional support you can phone NHS 24 on 111.

For an emergency ambulance phone 999.

It's common to have problems with sleep. This guide aims to help you:

- understand sleep and how it works
- understand how sleep is affected by what we do
- understand what insomnia is and what keeps it going
- find ways to sleep better

There are lots of different kinds of sleep problems, and lots of things that can cause you to have trouble with sleep. This guide offers help with insomnia – difficulty with falling asleep or staying asleep which affects your day-to-day life.

This guide can also help you develop better sleep habits in general.

There are other conditions that can affect sleep, which may need treatment. These include:

- [sleep apnoea](#)
- [restless legs syndrome](#)
- [narcolepsy](#)

- frequent nightmares

Speak to your GP if:

- you think you have sleep apnoea
- you think you have restless leg syndrome
- you think you have another health condition that affects your sleep

How to use this self-help guide

Working through this guide can take around 30 to 40 minutes. Please go through it at your own pace.

You can save and print this PDF guide on your device at any time.

Sleepio

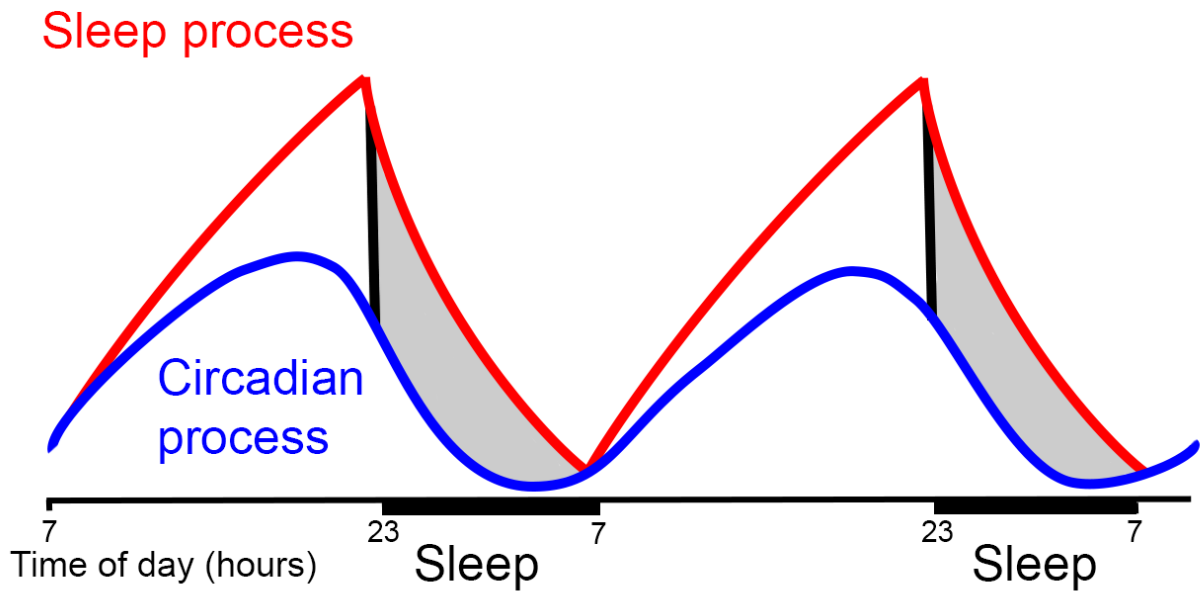
The Sleepio app is a free digital treatment designed to deliver a six-week CBT-I programme through your smartphone or other device. It's been designed and thoroughly tested by sleep experts and is recommended by NHS Scotland and the Scottish Government.

[Register and sign up for Sleepio](#)

2. How sleep works

Sleep is managed by two processes in your body and brain. One of those processes, called the sleep drive, makes you sleepier the longer you stay awake.

The second process is called the circadian process, or "body clock". It keeps your body and brain in tune with the light and dark cycles of the day and night. This process helps you feel more alert during the day, and aids with sleep at night.



Most people have a body clock that broadly lines up with the light and dark periods of a 24-hour day. There are some people, however, whose clocks run slightly later or slightly earlier. We sometimes call them ‘night owls’ and ‘morning larks’. A night owl might naturally sleep from 1.00am to 9.00am, for example, while a morning lark might naturally fall asleep at 9.00pm and wake at 5.00am. We’re all individuals with our own natural preferences.

There’s nothing wrong with being a night owl or a morning lark, but it can be difficult if your schedule doesn’t work with your preferred sleeping time. For example, you might naturally be a night owl, but have to get up at 6am for work.

How long should I sleep for?

The amount of sleep you need depends on lots of things, such as your age. Babies and young children need much more sleep than their parents, for example. Most adults of working age need between 7 and 9 hours a night. As people get older, they can find they need less sleep – around 7 to 8 hours a night on average.

Recommended hours of sleep

Age	Recommended hours of sleep each day
Newborn babies (0 to 3 months)	Between 14 and 17 hours, including daytime naps.
Infants (4 to 11 months)	12 to 15 hours, including naps.
Toddlers (1 to 2 years old)	11 to 14 hours, including naps.
Young children (3 to 5 years old)	10 to 13 hours.
Children (6 to 13 years old)	9 to 11 hours.
Teenagers (14 to 17 years ol)	8 to 10 hours
Adults aged 18 to 64	7 to 9 hours.
Adults aged 65 and over	7 to 8 hours.

You can find more information on these figures from the [National Sleep Foundation](#).

It’s important to remember there’s no ‘right’ amount of sleep for everyone – we’re all individuals. Just like the right shoe size, your ‘right’ sleep size will be one that fits well and feels comfortable. It should be enough sleep to allow you to be at your best during the day.

3. How do I know if I’m getting enough sleep?

If you’re getting the right amount of sleep, you’ll be functioning at your best. This means you’ll wake up feeling rested and won’t struggle to stay awake during the day. You won’t feel you ‘need’ coffee, tea, or energy drinks to get through the day, and you’ll be sleepy but not exhausted when it’s getting close to your regular bedtime.

You should usually be able to sleep for roughly the same amount of time

every night. If you're getting the best amount of sleep for you, you won't feel the need to 'catch up' by going to bed early, or lying in on your days off.

Sleep stages

There are 2 types of sleep: Rapid Eye Movement (REM) sleep and Non-rapid Eye Movement (NREM) sleep. NREM sleep is broken down into Stage 1, Stage 2, and Stage 3, with Stage 1 being the lightest sleep and Stage 3 the deepest.

People move through these different stages in 'sleep cycles'. Each cycle typically lasts 90-120 minutes for adults, and you might wake up briefly at the end of a cycle before going back to sleep.

It's normal to wake up briefly in the night, often between sleep cycles. Most people do this several times a night and fall back to sleep so quickly that they don't remember it in the morning. However, if you're waking very often and are still tired in the morning, or if you wake up and can't get back to sleep for long periods of time, this could be a sign of a sleep problem.

4. Laying the foundation for good sleep

Having a good foundation for sleep means your habits and lifestyle allow you to get the right amount of sleep for you.

A good foundation for sleep can look different for different people – there are no rules, but there are healthy habits that can help.

This video provides more information:

[Watch The Five Principles of Good Sleep Health on YouTube](#)

Light

Light helps your brain to determine when it's time to be awake and when it's time to sleep.

Your body expects to be exposed to bright, natural light earlier in the day, and dim light towards the evening. This helps your body clock determine when it's time to be active, and when it's time to wind down and sleep.

Accessing natural light can be difficult for people who spend most of their time indoors. It's helpful to go outside, even briefly, and get a good dose of daylight in the morning. It still works on cloudy or rainy days.

Keeping active

Staying physically and mentally active during the day is helpful for sleep. Physical activity is one way you can build up your sleepiness across the day, helping you feel ready to sleep at bedtime.

When you're less active during the day, you're more likely to feel sluggish, and may fall asleep. Even a relatively short nap reduces sleep drive and makes it harder to go to sleep at your regular bedtime.

Ways to keep your mind and body active during the day include:

- [exercise](#) – this can include walking or gentle stretches at home
- reading – [visit your local library](#) to access books and reading activities
- housework
- spending time with friends and family
- hobbies

Physical exercise is generally best done earlier in the day and not too close to bedtime.

Regular healthy daytime activities like the ones listed above provide a relatively easy way to help sleep. Activities that create a sense of happiness or productivity are also great for your mood.

5. Your sleep environment

It's important to make sure your sleeping environment is supportive for sleep. It helps if your sleep space is dark, cool and quiet.

Things to include in your sleep space include:

- comfortable bedding
- a way to block out light – this could be a blackout blind or even an eye mask
- cool air – try to open the window some time before bedtime to make sure the room is cool when you go to bed

There are also things it can be helpful to remove from your sleep space. For example:

- bills or any reminders of things that make you feel stressed
- screens – televisions, computers, and phones can keep you awake
- clutter – if your sleep space is messy it can be harder to relax

6. Things to avoid if you're struggling with sleep

There are some habits that make it more difficult to build a good foundation for sleep.

Caffeine

Caffeine 'masks' sleepiness. If you're feeling sleepy, having tea, coffee, or another caffeinated drink can help you feel more alert, but it doesn't change your sleep drive – you'll still need to go to sleep.

Unfortunately, it can take a long time for caffeine to leave the body. This means that if you have tea or coffee too late in the day, it can keep you awake when you want to go to sleep.

If you drink caffeinated drinks, it's a good idea to only have them in the morning and stick to non-caffeinated or decaffeinated drinks after lunchtime. You don't have to give up the drinks you enjoy, just consider the timing and look at alternatives for later in the day.

Alcohol

Alcohol has both a 'sedative' and a 'stimulant' effect – meaning it can make you feel sleepy, but also disturb your sleep.

Alcohol may make you fall asleep more quickly, but it causes you to wake during the night and spend more time in a state of lighter, less restorative sleep. This means people generally have poorer quality sleep after drinking alcohol.

Reducing your intake of alcohol and switching to non-alcoholic, non-caffeinated alternatives can help with sleep. You could also consider drinking earlier in the evening, so the effects have reduced by the time you go to bed.

Non-prescription drugs

Many people use cannabis, synthetic cannabinoids, or 'sleep aids' purchased online, with the aim of getting to sleep or sleeping better.

Although some people report these substances as being helpful, there's no regulation that can ensure they are safe, and they aren't clinically recommended for sleep problems.

When it comes to supplements and 'remedies' advertised online, many of them are made in or sold from countries with no regulation or oversight about what goes in them. None of them are clinically recommended to treat sleep issues, and they may react poorly with medication you're already taking.

If there's a remedy you'd like to try, speak to your GP or pharmacist for advice.

The [Healthy Living section on NHS inform](#) has more information on making changes to your lifestyle.

7. Why do people get insomnia?

Everyone has a bad night's sleep from time to time. This can happen for many reasons, such as illness or stress. However, for some people, poor sleep seems to 'get stuck' and becomes a continuing problem called insomnia.

Sometimes having a period of poor sleep can change the way you think and feel about sleep, and the things you do when it comes to sleeping. You might start worrying about getting enough sleep, and start making plans for getting more sleep.

'Chasing' sleep

Understandably, when people don't sleep well, they try and make sleep happen. Unfortunately, 'chasing' sleep actually makes it harder for sleep to happen naturally.

When people experience poor sleep, they might:

- cancel plans to try and get to bed early
- nap during the day
- drink a lot of caffeine
- think and worry more about sleep than they used to

It's natural to try and schedule in more sleep, find ways of staying alert during the day, and worry about your sleep issues. Unfortunately, getting into these habits can make it harder to get back into good sleep patterns, and turn sleep into a problem in your life.

8. How do you treat insomnia?

The NHS recommends Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I) as the first treatment. CBT-I is an evidence-based approach, meaning that clinical trials have shown it's effective at treating insomnia for most people.

CBT-I uses both cognitive and behavioural therapies to help people with the thoughts, feelings and behaviours that keep insomnia stuck. CBT-I can be done in individual or group therapy, through digital approaches like the Sleepio app (you can read more about that below), and self-help resources like this guide.

Sleepio

The Sleepio app is a free digital treatment designed to deliver a six-week CBT-I programme through your smartphone or other device. It's been designed and thoroughly tested by sleep experts and is recommended by NHS Scotland and the Scottish Government.

Over 80,000 people have used Sleepio in Scotland, and 67% of patients have seen clinical improvement in their insomnia.

[Register and sign up for Sleepio](#)

If Sleepio isn't an option for you, there are some CBT-I approaches you can try yourself.

9. Making sure your bed is a place for sleep

People who sleep well go to bed when they feel sleepy, and can fall asleep quickly once they're tucked in. They don't tend to give sleep much thought during the day and don't try to make sleep happen in any particular way.

People with insomnia often feel as if bed is no longer a place where sleep happens. Instead, bed often becomes a place of restlessness and worry. For

many people with insomnia, going to bed can be a stressful and frustrating process.

People with insomnia can start going to bed early to catch up on sleep, or trying to sleep at a specific time, rather than waiting until they're sleepy before getting into bed. It's good to get into the habit of relaxing and enjoying the evening, perhaps by doing something like watching a favourite TV programme. Then you can let sleepiness be the signal that tells you you're ready for bed.

Set up a sleep space and a relaxation space

Before you go to bed, set up a quiet, cosy space that you can use as a 'nest'. This is a relaxing place you can go when you aren't sleepy, to do an enjoyable and calming activity.

For example, you could set up an armchair with a blanket, cushions, and a flask of camomile tea, and have a book or the TV remote control handy. The activity you choose is important – it should be something that you enjoy, but don't find overly exciting. Reading a book, doing a puzzle, or watching a favourite TV programme are good examples.

Next, all you need to do is wait until you feel sleepy – let your body tell you that it's ready for bed.

If you get into bed feeling sleepy, and then start to feel awake or restless again, get back up, go to your cosy nest for a while, and carry on with your relaxing activity. Do this until sleepiness returns and signals to you that it's time to head back to bed.

Every time you do this, you strengthen the connection in your mind between being in bed and being asleep, making it easier for you to fall asleep once you get into bed. It also helps you avoid getting caught up in 'trying' to go to

sleep, which is often frustrating and leads to more time spent awake.

10. Good sleep habits

There are other good sleep habits that will make it easier for you to fall asleep at bedtime.

Getting up at the same time every day

It's important to get out of bed at the same time every day. This helps to regulate your body clock and sleep drive, so you develop a more reliable sleep pattern.

Avoiding napping

Avoiding napping during the day is important because it helps you 'save up' your sleep so it can take place at night. If you sleep during the day, your sleep drive is reduced by the time you're ready to go to bed, and it's harder to drop off.

If you feel like you want to have a nap during the day, it can be helpful to:

- go outside for a walk
- do some exercise
- have a chat with someone
- do some housework
- move around the room

Finding a way to be active will help you resist sleep pressure during the day, so it's more effective when you need it at night.

Avoid being awake in bed

Avoid being in bed when you aren't asleep. Also, avoid doing things in bed that don't help you sleep – like working, watching television, or using social

media. Doing these things in bed confuses your brain's connection between bed and sleep, making it harder to drop off when you lie down for the night.

11. Getting the most out of your sleep

If you spend most of your time asleep when you're in bed, you have good 'sleep efficiency'. Spending time in bed when you aren't sleeping reduces sleep efficiency.

If a lot of the time you spend in bed is spent awake, you might:

- start thinking over your problems and worries
- watching the clock and worrying about how much sleep you'll get
- become frustrated about not getting to sleep
- use devices like your mobile phone that might make you feel more awake
- start trying to sleep, which actually keeps you awake

Improving your sleep efficiency is an important part of getting over insomnia.

Routine and sleep efficiency

A good routine will help to ensure that you spend more of your time in bed asleep, rather than lying awake.

Set a time that's the earliest you're allowed to get into bed, so you don't end up lying there feeling awake. Wait for sleepiness to signal that it's time to get into bed, and use your cosy nest to relax if you can't drop off.

Try to:

- get up at the same time every morning
- avoid napping during the day

These habits can be hard to put into place when you're already feeling tired. It's tempting to lie in bed for a while when you wake up, or get into bed and

lie there hoping for sleep. However, if you give it time, working on your routine like this will help to adjust your body's rhythms back to a healthy pattern.

12. Healthy sleep habits during the day

Diet and lifestyle can make a big difference to your sleep. Try to:

- avoid drinks with caffeine after midday
- avoid alcohol within around 4 hours of your planned bedtime
- get outside during the morning and early afternoon, even if it's just for a few minutes
- avoid any work or study for around an hour before your bedtime
- get some exercise during the day, but avoid it close to bedtime

If you're looking for ways to relax in the evening, [try some breathing and relaxation exercises](#). You could also read a book, or look into a new hobby such as crafting. The important thing is that you enjoy what you're doing and find it relaxing.

Relaxation exercises are often unhelpful if you're doing them to try and go to sleep. Instead, do them to bring on a state of relaxation – let sleepiness come when it's ready.

13. Next steps

This self-help guide is intended for people with mild-to-moderate mental health issues.

If you're feeling distressed, in a state of despair, suicidal or in need of emotional support you can phone NHS 24 on 111.

For an emergency ambulance phone 999.

Keep using the techniques you found helpful from this guide – they should continue to benefit you. If there are some things that you didn't find helpful to begin with, stick with them for a few weeks – it can take time to improve your sleep routine and get used to the changes.

Further help

If you're feeling distressed, in a state of despair, suicidal or in need of emotional support you can phone NHS 24 on 111.

If you feel you need more help with your mental health, try speaking to your GP, or [search for mental health and wellbeing services in your area](#).

For information and advice when you're feeling down, you can phone [Breathing Space](#) on 0800 83 85 87.

The Breathing Space phoneline is available:

- 24 hours at weekends (6pm Friday to 6am Monday)
- 6pm to 2am on weekdays (Monday to Thursday)

If you found this guide helpful and would like to do more work like this, [Living Life](#) offers a range of structured psychological interventions and therapies to improve mental health and wellbeing. This service is appointment-based and specifically for low mood, or mild/moderate depression or anxiety. Living Life are open Monday to Friday, from 1pm to 9pm, and you can phone them on 0800 328 9655 for an assessment appointment.

Learn more

For more advice on sleep, visit [The Sleep Charity website](#).

For advice on things that can affect your sleep, visit some other parts of NHS inform:

- if you're experiencing anxiety, you might benefit from the [anxiety self-help guide](#)
- if you're dealing with stress, [visit our section on mental wellbeing and stress](#)
- there's information on [dealing with low mood and depression](#), or you can use the [depression self-help guide](#)
- we have information on [dealing with traumatic events](#), which can help if you're experiencing nightmares
- the [chronic pain self-help guide](#) could be helpful for you if pain is affecting your sleep