

Sleep

– sleep difficulties.

Sleep problems are common, and experiencing poorer sleep for short periods is both normal and harmless. Many people go through times in life when it is harder to fall asleep, wake frequently during the night, or get insufficient sleep. Long-term sleep problems can impair quality of life through reduced energy and motivation during waking hours. Lack of sleep can also negatively affect health, for example by increasing the risk of depression or cardiovascular disease.

If your sleep problems are extensive and affect your level of functioning when you are awake, it is sometimes necessary to get help.

About sleep

You spend about a third of your life sleeping. Sleep is important in many ways because it gives your body and brain the opportunity to recover and develop. Therefore, it is a good idea to try to improve your sleep if you are experiencing difficulty sleeping.

Individual sleep needs

The amount of sleep needed is individual and depends, among other things, on sleep quality. The general recommendation is that adults get around eight hours of sleep per night. That number is a good starting point, but it doesn't apply to everyone. Adults need to get between six and nine hours of sleep every night. Younger people, especially infants and teenagers, need more sleep, while older adults generally need less sleep. It is better to assess sleep needs based on alertness and daytime functioning than by the number of hours slept.

The different phases of sleep

Sleep is not the same throughout the night but consists of different phases that occur in cycles. When you fall asleep, your sleep is quite shallow and then becomes deeper and deeper. Finally, you enter deep sleep, the most important stage of sleep, where the body does most of its recovery. After deep sleep, sleep becomes lighter and more superficial again. The last stage before you wake up is called REM sleep. REM is an abbreviation for rapid eye movement. During REM sleep, you dream the most. Everyone wakes briefly during the night, often only for a few seconds, which you may not even remember in the morning.

This process is called a sleep cycle. A sleep cycle lasts about 90 minutes, and a single night usually consists of four to six cycles. Earlier in the night, sleep cycles consist of more deep sleep, while periods of deep sleep become shorter towards the morning.

The sleep cycle makes it perfectly natural to wake up from time to time during the night. Often you just wake up briefly, turn over and fall back asleep. In the morning you may not even remember being awake. However, if it takes a little longer to fall back asleep, you will remember that you woke up. You might then think that your sleep was poor, but that isn't necessarily the case.

It is common to assume your sleep was inadequate if you:

- Feel drowsy or tired when you wake up from deep sleep.
- Sleep less than eight hours.
- Wake up during the night.
- Feel tired when you wake up.

These signs do not necessarily mean your sleep has been poor. It can be helpful to wait and see how you feel during the day to determine whether you have had enough rest. If you feel alert and function well during the day, it likely means you are getting enough sleep.

What causes sleep problems?

There are many different explanations for sleep problems. A very common reason is that the body is in overdrive. For example, it could be caused by anxiety, high stress levels, or insufficient recovery. Other reasons may include irregular sleep times, alcohol or caffeine. Sleep problems are often associated with other conditions, such as depression or anxiety. Sleep routines are often affected by major life changes, such as experiencing a loss, moving, or having children.

Common myths about sleep

- **I need eight hours of sleep.**
Most people sleep between six and nine hours per night, but individual sleep needs vary and change over the course of a lifetime.
- **I need to sleep more tonight to make up for the sleep I lost yesterday.**
It is the quality of sleep that determines whether sleep is sufficient, not the number of hours you sleep. Occasional nights of lost sleep are naturally compensated for by the body in subsequent nights through more deep sleep. You don't need extra hours because your sleep naturally becomes more efficient.
- **If I don't get enough sleep, I won't be able to function tomorrow.**
It can be difficult to cope after a poor night's sleep, but it doesn't mean you won't be able to function. Research has shown that we perform well even after a few nights of poor sleep. However, if sleep deprivation continues for an extended period, both performance and feelings of tiredness are affected.
- **I haven't slept a wink.**

Testing in sleep laboratories shows that this claim is rarely true. People are generally bad at assessing their sleep. During the night, you naturally wake up several times during periods when your sleep is shallow. The feeling that you haven't slept at all is often due to your memories of your waking moments.