

COMMON SLEEP PROBLEMS FOR OLDER ADULTS

Quick Facts:

Older adults may become sleepy earlier in the day, wake up earlier, or enjoy less deep sleep. Chronic health problems, medical treatments, mental health conditions, sleep disorders and fragmented sleep routines are common in older adults. Sleep apnea, restless legs syndrome (RLS), and certain circadian rhythm sleep-wake disorders occur more frequently as we grow older.

KEY POINTS:

- **Changes in sleep patterns are a part of normal aging, yet older adults need as much sleep as younger adults.**
- **Common factors linked to poor sleep in older adults include medical problems, pain, medications, anxiety and depression.**
- **It is important for older adults to talk with healthcare providers about sleep problems.**
- **Treating a sleep disorder may prevent or minimize its negative effects on health and performance.**
- **Certain sleep-related medications have been associated with a higher rate of side effects like falls in older patients, so they should be used with caution.**



How Can I Learn More?

- Talk to your board-certified sleep medicine physician.
- Visit www.sleepeducation.org

Am I At Risk:

Common factors that put older adults at risk for sleep problems include:

- Pain or medical illnesses can interrupt sleep and cause sleep loss. Usual medical problems that are linked to poor sleep include heart, kidney and breathing conditions; cancer; and diabetes. Older adults frequently experience the sleep-stealing effects of illness such as arthritis pain, frequent need to urinate, breathing problems, heartburn, and hot flashes.
- Medications and treatments can impair sleep, especially in older adults who take more medications.
- Sleep disorders such as RLS, sleep apnea, and snoring occur more frequently in older adults.
- Psychological stress such as the death of a loved one or moving from a family home can disrupt sleep. Worry or sadness can make it difficult to fall asleep and stay asleep, which may cause more anxiety or depression.
- Lack of exercise can lessen sleepiness at bedtime or lead to feeling sleepy all of the time.
- Sleep habits such as irregular sleep hours, use of alcohol or caffeine before bedtime, and falling asleep in front of the TV can cause sleep problems.
- Too much napping during the day can lead to difficulty falling asleep and staying asleep at night.

GENERAL OVERVIEW:

Although changes in sleep patterns are a normal part of growing older, chronic disturbed sleep and waking up fatigued are not a normal part of aging. Adequate sleep is essential to physical health and emotional well-being at any age. A good night's sleep is vital for older adults because it can improve concentration and memory, help repair cell damage that occurs during the day, and refresh the immune system. All of this can help to prevent disease.

Certain sleep habits can also create more problems as we age. Conditions that lead to poor sleep can be managed, and poor habits are easy to improve.

Managing the physical and emotional causes of poor sleep and using good sleep habits can improve sleep in older adults.

TIPS:

Good sleep habits include keeping a regular sleep schedule, avoiding caffeine and other stimulants near bedtime, minimizing alcohol consumption, turning off electronic devices in the bedroom, and creating a comfortable place to sleep. Other tips include:

- Take a pain reliever or discuss with your doctor other ways to lessen pain before bedtime.
- Seek help to take care of medical and emotional problems and sleep disorders that impair sleep. This should include frequent review of all medications.
- Avoid stressful activities just before bedtime and create a soothing, regular bedtime routine.
- Set aside a period of time each day to think over or journal about things that worry you.
- Get regular physical activity to help promote healthy sleep and lessen fatigue.

➔ Next Steps:

- Talk with your doctor about your sleep concerns. It is especially important to tell them if poor sleep interferes with daytime activities and your ability to function.
- Get tested for sleep disorders such as sleep apnea if recommended by your doctor.
- If you find that you are feeling excessively sleepy in the early evening and waking up too early in the morning, discuss this with your doctor.
- Review all your treatments and medications with healthcare providers and talk about how to manage sleep-related side effects.



Questions For Your Physician

Take a few minutes to write your questions for the next time you see your healthcare provider.



Sample Questions:

Why do I feel tired all the time?

Why do I wake up so early in the morning?