

AGEING AND SLEEPING

Your hair is turning gray, vision is changing, and fine lines are appearing on your face. Even your sleep patterns seem to shift as you grow older. While sometimes hard to adjust to, these are all natural changes in older people, including healthy ones.

Early in life, you probably fell asleep quickly and slept soundly. As you've grown older, you may find settling down to sleep more difficult; you may awaken more often and then take longer to go back to sleep. The honk of a car horn or the bark of a neighbor's dog may be enough to disturb your sleep. Maybe you find yourself dozing off more easily while watching TV or reading the newspaper.

Repeated sleep troubles – whether it is difficulty falling asleep at night or falling asleep often during the day – are not normal at any age. Normal age-related changes sometimes hide sleep disorders that become more common as people grow older. Medical or psychiatric illnesses – especially those involving pain or depression – go hand-in-hand with sleep disorders. It is often difficult for healthcare professionals to tell which problem came first.

As you have aged, you've probably heard others say that people need less sleep as they grow older. Actually, older people still need about the same amount of sleep, but they are likely to sleep less in one stretch than they did when they were younger. As you age, your body becomes less skilled at maintaining sleep. On the other hand, you may be finding it easier to nap during the day, since your schedule may be less busy.

Although older people spend about the same amount of time in dreaming sleep (also known as REM, or rapid eye movement sleep) as younger people do, they get less of the deeper stages of sleep they need and awaken more often. Studies show that some people over age 60 awaken briefly an amazing 150 times a night! Young adults, on the other hand, wake up briefly about five times a night. Even though these awakenings usually aren't remembered the next morning, they may create the impression of restless sleep. In addition, most people over 65 wake up at least once a night for a trip to the bathroom.

According to a panel of experts from the National Institutes of Health, more than half of all people age 65 or over experience disturbed sleep. Insomnia is the most common of these complaints. Not only is the sleep process less complete as we get older, but we are also more likely to develop chronic medical illnesses that can interfere with sleep. Asthma and other respiratory diseases, heart disease, and arthritis are notorious offenders. Pain, fever, itching, and coughing often contribute to insomnia. Many drugs used to treat these problems can disrupt sleep. Paying close attention to your sleep habits and using relaxation techniques before going to bed may also help.

Difficulty falling asleep, sleep disruption, and waking up too early in the morning can be caused by depression, which is common as we grow older. For some people, depression begins gradually and progresses until "feeling blue" becomes a chronic way of life. Others focus on their poor sleep and become convinced that their lives would be better if they could just get a decent night's sleep. As poor sleep progresses, some people may stop eating regularly and may lose their usual interest and pleasure in the activities of daily life.

Loss of a loved one often triggers insomnia and depression. Surveys show that three quarters of newly widowed people report trouble sleeping a month after the death of their spouse. One year later, half report that their sleep problems continue!

While some older people may focus on trouble with sleep, others may have trouble with mood or performance during the day. Not all sleep disorders have symptoms that are obvious to individuals or to their families. Trouble sleeping sometimes stems from simple, easily correctable causes, such as use of caffeine, eating heavy meals, or exercising too late in the day. Sleep problems can be

the result of hospitalization, recovery after an operation, or travel. They may flare up during times of worry, or may smolder under constant stress.

In the quiet of the bedroom, some people find that their minds race and their worries overwhelm them. It can be helpful to set aside a time during the day for “worry time”, to allow for the consideration of problems and the formulation of solutions. With worry out of the way, bedtime can be devoted to focusing on sleep.

If you lead a quiet or restricted life, you may doze more during the day than you suspect. People with insomnia are often less active during the day than those who are better sleepers. A survey done in USA found that active retirees had fewer sleep problems than those who were less active. A general rule to follow is to try to confine your sleep to nighttime. Some people who feel extremely tired during the day don't suspect that anything is wrong with their sleep. They might find sleep unsatisfactory without being able to pinpoint the nature of their problem.

The tendency to be “early to bed and early to rise” increases as we grow older. Many patients adapt successfully, but some people find that their bodies are ready for bed earlier than they desire, often well before 8 or 9pm. This “Advanced Sleep Phase Syndrome (ASPS) can disrupt a person's social life, since it is frustrating to be awake early in the morning while others are still sleeping, and difficult to stay awake later in the evening when others are engaged in social activities.

Some simple solutions to treat this condition involves exposure to outdoor light late in the afternoon, and when possible, in the early evening. Bright light affects the timing of the sleep/wake cycle and causes a delay in the feeling of sleepiness in the early evening. It also postpones early morning awakenings.