

## SLEEP AND GROWING OLDER

Sleep needs change over a person's lifetime. Children and adolescents need more sleep than adults. Interestingly, older adults need about the same amount of sleep as younger adults -- seven to nine hours of sleep per night.

Unfortunately, many older adults often get less sleep than they need. One reason is that they often have more trouble falling asleep. A study of adults over 65 found that 13 percent of men and 36 percent of women take more than 30 minutes to fall asleep.

Also, older people often sleep less deeply and wake up more often throughout the night, which may be why they may nap more often during the daytime. Nighttime sleep schedules may change with age too. Many older adults tend to get sleepier earlier in the evening and awaken earlier in the morning.

There are many possible explanations for these changes. Older adults may produce and secrete less melatonin, the hormone that promotes sleep. They may also be more sensitive to -- and may awaken because of -- changes in their environment, such as noise.

Older adults may also have other medical and psychiatric problems that can affect their nighttime sleep. Researchers have noted that people without major medical or psychiatric illnesses report better sleep.

Not sleeping well can lead to a number of problems. Older adults who have poor nighttime sleep are more likely to have a depressed mood, attention and memory problems, excessive daytime sleepiness, more nighttime falls, and use more over-the-counter or prescription sleep aids. Poor sleep is also associated with a poorer quality of life.

Many people believe that poor sleep is a normal part of aging, but it is not. In fact, many healthy older adults report few or no sleep problems. Sleep patterns change as we age, but disturbed sleep and waking up tired every day are not part of normal aging. If you are having trouble sleeping, see your doctor or a sleep specialist. There are treatments that can help.

### Getting Help for Your Sleep

If you are often tired during the day and don't feel that you sleep well, you should discuss this with your doctor or healthcare provider. Many primary care providers can diagnose sleep disorders and offer suggestions and treatments that can improve your sleep.

During your appointment your doctor will ask you about your symptoms and may have you fill out questionnaires that measure the severity of your sleep problem.

It is also helpful to have your bed partner come with you to your appointment since he or she may be able to report symptoms unknown to you like loud snoring, breathing pauses, or movements during sleep.

Since older people are more likely to take medications and to have medical problems that may affect sleep, it is important for your doctor to be aware of any health condition or medication you are taking.

Don't forget to mention over-the-counter medications, coffee or caffeine use, and alcohol since these also may have an impact on your sleep.

Sleep centers employ physicians and others who are experts in problems that affect sleep. If the sleep specialist needs more information, he or she may ask you to undergo an overnight sleep study, also called a polysomnogram. A polysomnogram is a test that measures brain waves, heart rate, breathing patterns and body movements. Another common sleepiness test is the multiple sleep latency test. During this test, the person has an opportunity to nap every two hours during the daytime. If the person falls asleep too quickly it may mean that he or she has too much daytime sleepiness.

### Sleep Disorders

If you have a sleep disorder it can be hard to get a good night's sleep. Sleep disorders can make it hard to fall asleep or stay asleep during the night and can make you drowsy during the day. The following are the most common sleep disorders among older adults:

1. Insomnia
2. Sleep-disordered breathing, such as snoring and sleep apnea
3. Movement disorders, such as restless legs syndrome

If you are getting what you consider an adequate amount of sleep and are still drowsy and sluggish, then you might have a sleep disorder and should consider seeking professional consultation.