

Unanswered audience questions

Do you have any tips for managing sleep patterns whilst doing shift work? This will include working Early Turns, Late Turns, and of course Nights. Not I'm glad to say all in the same week but it can and sometimes does happen.

There's a general plan for managing Night Shifts. Shift work is never easy but it's always better to rotate shifts going later than earlier as our body clock is easier to adjust that way. Ideally think ahead, move your sleep towards the next shift as early as possible and minimise sleep loss (called sleep debt) by targeting naps.

There are lots of discussions about how we improve our ability to get to sleep, but is there anything that we can do to avoid waking up earlier than you need to?

There's an overall summary for what can be behind us waking up to early. There's a checklist to go through as this can be due to a variety of different factors. The key is to do some detective work and work out what has changed to set up this sleep pattern. Also, to try changing the most obvious interrupters too.

Working in transport I mainly work during the day, but sometimes (roughly twice a month) have to work nights. Are there are tips on regulating a sleep pattern when having to sometimes work the night?

I have put together a plan for managing Night Shifts, which includes what to do before the first night of shift work. In general, try to put sleep in the bank by napping before your night shift, and moving your body clock towards the later shift by going to bed later in the nights' before you shift. Also make sure you catch up as quickly as possible afterwards. Controlling your light and mealtimes is key to making the adjustments easier to manage.

I am hurtling towards my mid 50's and perimenopausal - in the hell years before final diagnosis; pre-HRT (long live HRT), tiredness and sleep were incredibly erratic and unpredictable. The only thing that seemed to help was to listen to the radio (putting a light on was fatal). I now struggle to get off to sleep without the radio - is this wrong and should I try to change it. If so, how?

Having something to listen to, which help us get to sleep is perfectly ok. In fact, we are used to doing the same to help babies get to sleep when we sing them a lullaby. So, listening to the radio is in fact a natural way of getting to sleep for some people. Having something which soothes us and helps us relax and nod off is great if it doesn't interrupt our sleep later and wake us up. For some they also use the radio to create 'white-noise' too which helps to block out other sounds which could interrupt their sleep.

I struggle to sleep as my partner snores badly, is there any ways to help her with this to either stop it or lower the amount of snoring?

There are a few practical things to consider when someone is snoring. The simplest is how are they sleeping. If it's on their back change it to side lying. Losing weight and not drinking before bed are also things to consider, as is giving up smoking. Then there's looking at the airways. For the nostrils you could consider nasal rinses and ways of expanding the nostrils or even strips on the outside. For the jaw and tongue there are devices which help change the alignment here too, typically pulling the jaw forward. It's often the tongue posture

which has changed as the muscles weaken as we age. The tongue also gets fatter when we put on weight which restricts airflow. Doing exercise to get fitter in general and to strengthen the tongue can help too. It's worth visiting the GP if the snoring is loud to check for Sleep Apnoea which it is a risk factor for.

How does the long-term sleep deprivation affect parents of young children? I haven't slept a whole night for over two years now and due another baby soon. I can't see us getting a whole night's sleep for another few years.

Sleep deprivation for any reason is a horrible thing to cope with as it can literally drive us to distraction. The best way of getting sleep when you have young babies is to grab it when you can. Learning to nap would be a great skill. I would recommend that you don't worry about the effects of losing sleep for a couple of years as once your children are older you will be able to get things back on track. The main thing is to support each other and to get lots of help from family when you can

It takes my partner 2-3 hours to drop off sometimes, but I am asleep within minutes. I often feel guilty that I can sleep but she can't. What can I do to help her?

It sounds like your partner is suffering from severe Sleep Onset Insomnia. I would therefore suggest that you advise your partner to see the GP and get some support with a solution called CBTI (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Insomnia). In the meantime, I would also suggest that your partner only goes to bed when tired enough to fall asleep within 20 minutes. There is literally no point in lying in bed awake trying to fall asleep when you know you aren't tired, in fact it's quite the opposite of what we should be doing. This is because when we take 2-3 hours to drop off creates an association in our brain that the bed is somewhere to lie awake rather than fall asleep and this makes it even harder to nod off. Try to get your partner to establish a regular relaxing bedtime routine and then a regular bedtime when your partner is able to fall asleep in about 10-15 minutes. The maximum to wait is 20 minutes, and then if you aren't asleep, you should get out of bed, read a book, relax with a warm drink and then wait until you feel tired enough to come back to the bedroom and try to nod off again.

Is there anything that can be done to reduce the frequency of nightmares? I often get them. I don't watch anything distressing or the news or eat cheese, so I know it's none of those things.

When we dream amongst other things such, we engage memory processing and problem solving which is why we are often told to 'sleep on something we aren't sure about it' as we will 'know the answer in the morning'. Part of this 'thought processing' procedure also involves rinsing our emotions. In fact, our Amygdala, the part of the brain, which helps process emotions such as fear, and aggression is actually 50% more active when we dream than during the day. As we dream, we are essentially logging our emotional memory storage. If we are worried or anxious, we would tend to have more worrying dreams, which could even be nightmares when under a lot of stress. Nightmares can also be caused by irregular sleep patterns, medications and PTSD. I would review if any of these causes could apply to you and then work through possible solutions. Writing all of your thoughts down in a journal before bedtime might be a good place to start.

Since a bereavement I've been having issues sleeping, I got to bed and within 10 minutes I then am woken up from a bad dream, happening almost every night and after any advice? I have tried to cut out tv / phones etc but no joy.

I would think that you are still going through the grieving process which is causing you to have these sorts of dreams when you are processing your emotions as you sleep. Perhaps you could talk to friends and family about how you are feeling or seek professional advice if you think it would help too.

Any tips for helping to get to sleep when suffering from slight heart palpitations at night?

I would always get anything close to heart palpitations checked out by your GP. Once this is done and assuming there's nothing serious, you could try slowing down your breathing, and taking deep breathes as both help to slow down the heart. Also, if you think that stress could be involved try relaxation techniques and meditation such as mindfulness.

Coffee actually makes me go to sleep rather than keep awake. Am I odd or is there a scientific reason for this?

All of us have metabolism which is unique to us, and this includes our metabolism of caffeine and our tolerance of it. Whilst caffeine, drunk at night, keeps most awake for some it has absolutely no affect. However, it would be very unusual for someone to feel sleepy as a direct result of drinking coffee. It may be that you are metabolising caffeine very quickly and then crashing after this process. However, in your case this would be extraordinarily fast as for most it takes 10 hours to fully process caffeine, and even after 6 hours, ½ of its affect is still in our body. One factor to consider could be dehydration as caffeine is a diuretic. With extra water loss you could then feel tired. However, yes, it's unusual for coffee to make someone go to sleep straight away. There are genetic tests available which analyse caffeine sensitivity if you want to delve deeper.

Mrs Thatcher was apparently famous for being able to manage on 3 to 4 hours of sleep a night. How do you think she managed to achieve this?

Some people actually have a gene which enables them to feel refreshed after 4-6 hours of sleep. It's thought that Napoleon was such an individual. However, Mrs Thatcher's ability to manage on this little sleep was supplemented by taking power naps during the day. This strategy, however, is not recommended by sleep scientists as we need a single 'block of sleep' through the night to get all the benefits of sleep. Functioning on less sleep, therefore, isn't something to aim at. Part of the benefits of nightly sleep is that we process 90% of the toxins from the brain during the Deep Sleep stage of our sleep. If we don't do this, we run the risk of the toxins building up, which is a risk factor for Alzheimer's Disease. On a personal level I don't think the two factors, Mrs Thatcher's shorter than ideal sleep for a large number of years and her sadly suffering from this disease, are totally unrelated.

I've been told that if I keep waking up at 4am then I'm probably going to bed too early. So if you need to be up at 7am, don't go to bed until midnight. What do you think of this tactic?

I'd definitely consider this as a tactic. Rather than do it in one go I would recommend you move your sleeping time later by about 10 minutes a night to allow your body clock to acclimatise naturally to this process. It may also be that light is waking you up too early so I would check this out too.

When you say no tech 1hr, ideally 2hrs before bed, does that include TV?

The reason for avoiding tech before bed, apart from its use stimulating us, is that tech screens emit a wavelength of light called 'blue light'. It's this (blue) wavelength which helps us wake up in the morning when it's emitted naturally from the sun. At night however, blue light blocks (and delays) the release of Melatonin, our Sleep Hormone. As a result, we don't have the desire to 'nod-off' until later than usual. Whilst TV screens emit less blue light than tech screens, they can still affect your Melatonin production and therefore delay your sleep. One issue here is that the modern LED screens emit more blue light than older TVs. If this is the case for you, and you want to watch the TV at night, as you find it a great way to unwind before bed, you can put filters on the screen or wear blue light blocking glasses. Certainly, there's no problem whatsoever watching TV at night if you find it relaxing and helps you get to sleep. It's an individual choice, but don't fall asleep in the couch watching TV as this will then interfere with you getting to sleep when you go to bed.

I have sleep apnoea and wear a CPAP machine at night. I assume this will hinder my ability to attempt to breathe through my nose (which I always find difficult anyway, as my nose frequently feels "blocked", even when I don't have a cold).

Technically the CPAP machine is designed to push the air through your nose. There are different masks available though, depending on what is behind the apnoea and the user prefers to breathe at night. For mouth breathers the mask will cover both the nose and the mouth. It may be that you have a deviated septum, which is why you find it harder to breathe through the nose perhaps? I'd try nasal rinses to see if that makes a difference. In general, most CPAP users find it harder to breathe out than breathe in, as you are exhaling against the airflow, but I'd certainly go back to your physician if you are having any difficulties or finding it uncomfortable to use your CPAP.

I find it far easier to fall asleep during the day than at night - if I take a nap I'll be asleep in less than a minute, but I do usually get 7 hours at night. Does this mean I'm likely to be a night owl or that I'm just not getting quality sleep?

It sounds more like you probably aren't getting enough quality sleep at night and then topping up with your nap in the day. Falling asleep in less than a minute is a sign that we are sleep deprived, as we are designed to take around 5 to 10 minutes to fall asleep.

Prehistorically this would have allowed us time to 'check our environment for danger'. I would avoid having a nap in the day and aim to get more sleep at night. Try not setting an alarm at the weekends as the start of this process to see how much sleep your body naturally needs. I would certainly aim to get all your sleep at night and keep trying this until your sleep is back in its natural pattern. If you can't do this easily, I would go to the GP who might be able to prescribe you some Melatonin which can help reset your body clock.

How dark does my room need to be for good sleep. We have vertical blinds which give us privacy and let natural light in - is that good or bad?

Ideally your room should be cool, dark, and as quiet as a cave. I would swap the vertical blinds for black out blinds if you are finding the natural light is waking you up, or you don't feel refreshed after a full night's sleep. Wearing an eye mask is a solution too. We know that even when our eyes are closed our eyelids let some light through which the brain is registering. Sleeping with the light on actually affects our metabolism. We also get less sleep (by about 15 minutes) than someone who sleeps in the dark when we have lights on during the night.

So, if there's a lot of light leakage, I would try to reduce it in whatever way works best for you.

It doesn't matter how much sleep I get; my Fitbit shows that I go straight into deep sleep within minutes - can stages 1 & 2 be short (for a normal person)?

Starting with how long we would expect it to take to get to Deep Sleep it's about 20 minutes to 25 minutes. With regards to tracking sleep, even though they claim otherwise, Sleep Trackers are notoriously poor at accurately tracking sleep stages, so I wouldn't take the results as being what's actually happening. The key is how do you feel when you wake up and throughout the day. If you feel fully refreshed and alert, you will certainly be getting enough Deep Sleep for your individual needs. Coming to how could you be getting into Deep Sleep quicker than normal it can be due to lots of Cardio exercise and meditating shortly before bed. However, it's very unlikely that this would be a few minutes after falling asleep.

My sleep cycle seems to be tuned more to the hours of daylight, as I've gotten older. Bedtime usually between 21:00 and 22:30 (at the absolute latest). But waking up naturally any time after 4 am in summertime - but closer to 06:30 in autumn/winter, especially after the clocks change... Is this normal and should I be setting an alarm?

We certainly go to sleep earlier as we get older as our Chronotype, or body clock shifts over time. Waking up feeling fully refreshed and rejuvenated, no matter when, is the main thing to consider. Waking without an alarm is perfect too as it means your body tends to naturally wake you up when you have had enough sleep, However, if waking up at 4am doesn't suit your lifestyle you could try going to bed later by 10 minutes each night to gently reset your body clock. Also, if it's only summertime that you are waking this early you may have light leakage into your bedroom. Using black out blinds or an eye mask is something to consider here if this is the case. I'd always recommend not using an alarm, if possible, though.

I wake up after 4-5 hours of night-time sleep, possibly assisted by the goods train that runs past my house at 3am. I read to resettle and accept that it happens. On a previous session on this subject in a Q&A session I was told I should go to bed later to be able to sleep through, which was really unhelpful. Do you agree with that analysis?

If you are identifying the goods train as the interrupter of your sleep at this time, this is the issue to address. Ear plugs would be the obvious solution. Going to bed later would probably be out of sync with your natural body clock, and sleep preferences, and wouldn't be where I would start to solve this problem.

My dad has worked night shifts for years and struggles with sleep getting 5-6 hour during the week, and struggles switching to 'days' over the weekend. What would help him?

I have included a long answer to problems with Night Shifts and how to adjust the body clock. Switching quickly from a nightshift to daytime routine, without incurring a sleep debt (losing sleep) is not possible. This is because our body clock can only accommodate a maximum of a one-hour change or so each night. Our Circadian Rhythm is actually set to be in sync with the day/night pattern of sunlight which only changes by a couple of minutes a day. So for most of us even an hour change is quite a stretch. Hopefully the tips provided in the longer answer can help. Napping at targeted times is certainly something to consider here to make up for the sleep debt.



I sleep in the recovery position, arm under the pillow. I struggle to sleep on my side & can't sleep on my back at all. My arms get in the way! any advice please.

Changing sleep patterns take a while but if you are sleeping face down certainly, I would try to change this as it can cause back and neck pain, especially as we get old. I would prop your back up front and back with pillows and put a cushion between your knees to prevent you rolling forwards. Then, use a pillow which keeps your head and neck in alignment with the rest of your spine. I would then try to sleep on your side.