

8 WAYS TO IMPROVE SLEEP QUALITY AS YOU AGE

Aging can affect the quality of your sleep. You may wake up more often and have a less consistent sleep pattern than you did when you were younger. You can take steps to overcome these issues.

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As you age, you may find yourself waking up throughout the night. And you may wonder, "Is this a natural part of aging, or is something wrong?"

Rest assured that tossing and turning is nothing to be alarmed about. One of the most common and pronounced sleep changes that come with aging is waking up more frequently. The most likely cause is some type of physical discomfort, such as the need to use the bathroom or reposition an achy joint.

Luckily, older folks are generally able to fall back asleep just as quickly as younger people do. Plus, most age-dependent changes in sleep occur before age 60, including the time it takes to fall asleep, which doesn't increase much later in life.

Other changes that are part of normal aging include getting less sleep overall and spending less time in the rapid eye movement (REM) cycle - the dream phase of sleep. These changes can vary quite a bit between individuals, and in general they affect men more than women.

Getting older isn't necessarily a sentence to restless sleep for the rest of your life. While you may not be able to change the way your natural sleep rhythms and tendencies have shifted, you can try many simple techniques to limit disruptors and improve your quality of sleep.

Try these tips:

- Review your medications and supplements with your doctor or pharmacist and consider changes to their use that could be affecting sleep quality.
- Stop drinking fluids within two hours of bedtime to minimize trips to the bathroom.
- If pain keeps you awake at night, talk to your doctor to see if taking an over-the-counter pain medication before bed may help. While this may not stop you from waking up, you may have an easier time falling back to sleep.
- Keep your sleep environment as dark as possible. This includes limiting lights from the television, computer screen and mobile devices. Light disrupts your body's natural sleep rhythm.
- Limit caffeine intake, particularly in the eight hours before bedtime.
- Avoid alcohol near bedtime - alcohol may help you fall asleep, but once it wears off, it makes you more likely to wake up in the night.

- To maintain a quality sleep cycle, limit daytime napping to just 10 to 20 minutes. If you find that daytime naps make you less sleepy at bedtime, avoid napping altogether.
- If you have trouble falling asleep, try taking 1 to 2 milligrams of melatonin (look for the sustained-release tablets) about two hours before bed.

It's important to aim for seven to eight hours of sleep each night. If you experience poor quality sleep despite taking these steps, or you are tired or sleepy on most days, talk to your doctor.

Experiments

1. Avoid beverages (including alcohol) at least two hours before bedtime to minimize trips to the bathroom.
2. Take a short midafternoon nap (10 to 20 minutes) when your schedule allows and see if you feel more rested overall.
3. Ease aches and pains that could disrupt your sleep by stretching for a few minutes each morning and at night.