

Sleeping well

with Autism and ADHD



A short guide to improving sleep with added techniques adapted for those with neurodevelopmental conditions.

Contents

How much sleep do I need?	2
Recommended hours of sleep	3
Impact of poor sleep	4
What to do when you can't sleep.....	5
Tips for good sleep 1	6
Tips for good sleep 2.....	7
Things to avoid	8
Thoughts Around Sleep	9
Sleep and Autism.....	10
Autism Sleep Tips.....	11
Sleep and ADHD	12
ADHD Sleep Tips.....	13
Resources to learn more	14
Getting help with your sleep	15

How much sleep do I need?

The amount of sleep you need changes throughout your life.

- This is because the more our brain and body needs to grow and recover, the more sleep we will need.
- This can fluctuate throughout our lives. However, as we grow older, we typically get less sleep.

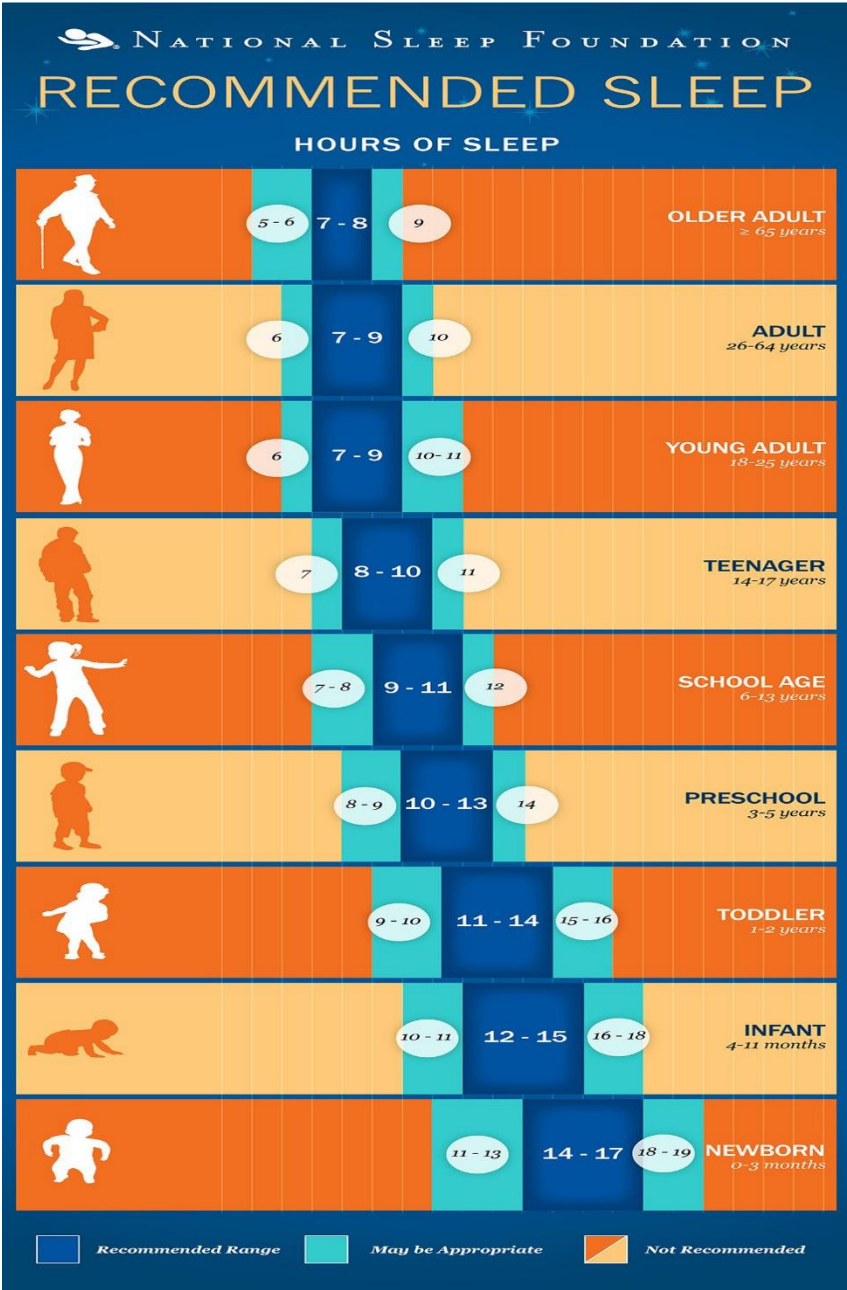
Everyone needs slightly different amounts of sleep.

- Other than age, neurodiversity can also impact your need for sleep.
- This is due to differences in the way neurodiverse individuals' bodies work, changing their sleep needs.

The amount of sleep you need can change day to day. This can be because of:

- Your physical health: If you are unwell or have used lots of energy, you will need more sleep to recover.
- Your mental health: Feelings of stress, anxiety, depression, and grief can alter our sleep needs.
- Your hormonal cycles and any changes related to this.
- Substance use: Alcohol, nicotine, and illicit substances. This includes prescription medication.
- Food and drink, particularly caffeine.

Recommended hours of sleep



Impact of poor sleep

Psychological Changes

- Confusion
- Memory difficulties
- Difficulty thinking and holding attention
- You may be more emotional than usual or find it more difficult to control your emotions
- You may be more sensitive to negative emotions.
- You may start to hallucinate or have delusions
- You may feel more grumpy, angry, or impulsive
- You may be more likely to develop a mental health condition such as depression, anxiety, or substance misuse



Physical Changes

- Slower reflexes or reaction times
- Body aches and pain
- Reduced energy and increased fatigue
- Difficulty regulating your body temperature
- You are more likely to get an infection
- You may take longer to heal from injuries or illnesses
- Metabolism changes, resulting in weight loss or gain
- You may start to crave more unhealthy foods
- You may notice changes in your senses (e.g., becoming more sensitive to noises and lights)
- You may feel sick or nauseous more often
- In some cases, substantial sleep loss can lead to death



What to do when you can't sleep

Don't stay in bed – get up and do something relaxing

- If you haven't fallen asleep in 25 minutes of being in bed, get up and do something relaxing, like reading a book. This is to avoid associating your bed with struggling to sleep.
- Go back to bed only when you feel you will fall asleep.

Keep the bedroom for sleeping and sex

- Don't play games or watch TV in bed. By limiting what you do in your bed, you will only associate it with sleeping.

Meet any physical needs

- Are you thirsty, hungry, need the toilet or in pain?

Keep electronic devices away

- Electronic screens emit blue light, which tricks the brain into thinking that it should be awake.

Don't smoke, or drink any caffeine or alcohol

- These substances alter the neurochemical process of sleep which reduces the quality of any sleep you get.

Try not to force yourself to sleep

- When we try and force ourselves to sleep, we can increase our stress levels. This makes it harder for us to sleep.

Tips for good sleep 1

Follow a sleep routine

- Do a relaxing activity before sleeping (e.g., light stretches, drawing, listening to an audiobook etc.)
- Go to the toilet before going to bed.
- Go to bed and wake up at the same times, even if you get less sleep one night. You should not oversleep, and only sleep enough to feel rested.

Get daily exercise

- You can do this at any time of the day, but it is recommended you avoid exercising 2 hours before bed.
- Exercise helps to increase physical health, bodily relaxation, and mental wellbeing. These factors can make sleep come easier and feel more restoring.

Get daily sunlight exposure

- This helps to regulate the body's internal clock. The blue wavelengths of light in sunlight stop the release of melatonin in your brain. This helps you to feel awake in the day and sleep at night.
- This can also improve your mood.

Get your body ready for sleep

- Slowing down your heartrate, controlling your breathing and relaxing your muscles help to get your brain ready for sleep.

Tips for good sleep 2

Create the ideal sleeping environment for you

- Keep your bedroom cool, between 16 and 18 degrees Celsius
- Keep your bedroom well ventilated
- Explore whether a quiet environment or light noise (such as a fan, white noise, rain sounds or the radio) are helpful for you.
- Keep the room dark
- Make sure your bed is comfy
- Control allergens (try an air purifier or leaving a window open)

Manage disruptions

- This could be a partner that snores (try ear plugs or sleeping in different beds)
- Pets getting into your bed at night
- Excessive noise from outside the bedroom (try ear plugs, sound proofing or white noise)
- Use black out curtains
- Put your phone on do not disturb (or keep it in another room)
- Use clocks that don't tick or remove clocks completely (this may help to stop you thinking about how long you have been trying to sleep for, or how long you have until you need to wake up again)

Things to avoid

Blue light at night

- These light wavelengths can stop the release of melatonin in the brain. This tricks the brain into thinking it is daytime and that you should be awake.
- Blue light is emitted from electronic screens such as phones, TV screens, and computers.

Spending time awake in bed

- Keep the bedroom for sleeping and sex. If you are awake, leave the bedroom.

Avoid caffeine, nicotine, alcohol, and other drugs 6 hours before bed

- Caffeine and nicotine are stimulants which make it harder to sleep.
- Alcohol stops you from entering the stages of sleep which make you feel rested.

Avoid things that stimulate or arouse your nervous system before sleeping, including:

- sugary or spicy foods
- loud noises
- bright lights
- temperature extremes
- things that trigger strong emotional reactions (e.g., horror shows, emotive music etc.)

Thoughts Around Sleep

Worry time

If you tend to worry a lot before sleeping, try allocating a 'worry time' during the day. This could be 30 minutes during the day where you work through a list of things that have worried you in the day. If you start to worry before sleeping, make note of what is worrying you and come back to it during your worry time.

Visualisations

If you struggle to keep your mind occupied when trying to sleep, some people find it helpful to visualise or imagine something relaxing. This could be taking a mental walk somewhere you know well or following a slow-moving stream through an imaginary landscape.

Observing your thoughts

When we try to sleep, we can get stuck in our thoughts, keeping us awake. Observing our thoughts allows us to notice them, without getting stuck in them. For example, you may think, "I need to iron my shirt", which leads to you making a mental checklist of things you need to do. Observing your thoughts would allow you to notice the thought and let it pass out of your mind, without letting it pull you into further thoughts. This can be more effective than trying to just 'not think'.

Sleep and Autism

Sleep differences in Autism

- Up to 86% of autistic people experience sleep difficulties.
- Autistic people spend less time in regenerative stages of sleep compared to neurotypicals.
- Sleep difficulties tend to increase with age in autism.
- Generally, autistic people take longer to fall asleep and wake up from sleep.
- For some, sleep is unpredictable and hard to control, making it distressing.

Reasons for increased sleep difficulties

- Sensory differences
- Restricted routines or behaviours that prevent good sleep hygiene.
- Circadian rhythm differences (e.g., differences in clock genes and melatonin production).
- Autistic people are more likely to have a mental health condition such as anxiety, which impacts sleep.
- Autistic people are more likely to have health conditions which reduce sleep quality, such as gastrointestinal difficulties.
- Autistic people may have different sleep needs than neurotypical people. Sleeping at neurotypical times can feel unnatural for some people on the spectrum.
- Difficulties with transitions between environments and tasks.

Autism Sleep Tips

Some research has shown that better sleep results in improved sensory experiences, social communication, and ability to tolerate change for autistic people.

Manage the sensory environment

- Adjust your sleeping environment to best meet your sensory needs (e.g., specific textures, temperatures, smells or sounds etc.)

Incorporate good sleep hygiene into your routine

- This might include scheduling in relaxation time or changing the times where you engage in some tasks.

Be mindful of fixations before bed

- Try to allow time in the day for your interests and hobbies so you don't get distracted around bedtime.

Get to know your sleep

- Keeping a sleep diary can be helpful to understand what helps and prevents a good night's sleep.

Sleep promoting activities

- Everyone has different things that make them feel sleepy. For example, some activities may be calming for a neurotypical individual, but alerting for an autistic person.
- Spending some time to figure out how some activities make you feel may be helpful when structuring a good sleep routine.

Sleep and ADHD

Sleep differences in people with ADHD

- People with ADHD are at more risk of developing a sleep disorder.
- From the onset of puberty, people with ADHD are more likely to take longer to fall asleep, wake up more in the night and spend less time asleep than neurotypical people.
- Sleep difficulties tend to increase with age in those with ADHD.

ADHD subtypes and sleep difficulties

- People with the inattentive subtype of ADHD tend to have later bedtimes and struggle getting to sleep.
- People with the hyperactive subtype of ADHD tend to experience insomnia often.
- People with the combined type ADHD (inattentive and hyperactive) may struggle with both getting to sleep and staying asleep.

Poor sleep can make ADHD symptoms worse

- Sleep deprivation can increase inattention, hyperactivity, impulsivity and reduce your executive functioning.

ADHD Sleep Tips

Occupying the sleepy mind

- The quietness associated with night-time can be difficult for an ADHD brain to manage. You might find that your thoughts race during the night because there is nothing to occupy your brain.
- Listening to a relaxing podcast, audiobook or radio station can be helpful to give your mind something to focus on that isn't alerting.

Managing impulses

- It can be easier to hyper-fixate or impulsively do things at bedtime, as there are less distractions around. This can make it harder for you to sleep.
- Writing down any thoughts, ideas, or feelings you may get hooked on can allow you to postpone the fixation to a more appropriate time.

Morning routine

- For some people with ADHD, getting out of bed in the morning can be challenging.
- To avoid procrastinating getting out of bed, try and schedule something you enjoy in the morning to motivate you to get up.

Resources to learn more

NHS – How to get to sleep

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/how-to-get-to-sleep/>

National Autistic Society – sleep and autism

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/physical-health/slee>

Mind

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/sleep-problems/about-sleep-and-mental-health/>

YouTube – How to get to sleep when you have ADHD

<https://youtu.be/zbhUFX6ZRYA>

YouTube – Sleep difficulties in Autism Spectrum Disorder

https://youtu.be/fhgRVxYW_HI

10 medical reasons for feeling tired – NHS

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sleep-and-tiredness/10-medical-reasons-for-feeling-tired/>

Royal College of Psychiatry – Sleeping Well

<https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/problems-disorders/sleeping-well>

Getting help with your sleep

General Practitioner

Your GP is your first point of contact for any health and wellbeing concerns. They will be able to advise or direct you.

Sleepstation

Sleepstation offers online support for those who struggle with their sleep. It is free to access in England through a GP referral. Visit your GP to request a referral or go to www.sleepstation.org.uk for further details.

Talking therapies

Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Talking Therapies is a free confidential NHS service designed to help with common mental health problems such as stress, anxiety, and depression. These are factors that could be impacting on your sleep.

Anyone 18 years or older and registered with a GP can access support, though a GP referral is not necessary as you can self-refer at the following link: [Referral Form \(mayden.co.uk\)](http://mayden.co.uk)

You can also call on **0333 188 1060**. Lines are open Monday-Friday 8am-8pm and Saturday 9am-12:30pm

Go to: <https://notts-talk.co.uk/> for further details.