

Sleep during the COVID-19 pandemic

Tips to support better sleep and daytime functioning

During this special time of the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions, all of us are affected in many ways. This sudden change to daily life, combined with any worries we have about our health and future, can cause changes to our sleep and daily functioning. High quality sleep restores our brain and body functions, enables us to function well during waking and is essential for our physical health and wellbeing. The following general recommendations will help support your sleep and daytime functioning.

Try to keep your sleep-wake times very regular



A regular pattern of sleeping and waking times helps to increase your sleep quality and also your waking functions. The official recommendation for healthy sleep for adults is between 7-9 hours. Everyone is different, so you may need a bit more or a bit less. Currently, it may take you longer to fall asleep, which is normal under these special circumstances.

If you feel very tired during the daytime, it is ok to take a short (30-40 min) nap. After lunch is a good time, but if you're having a lot of difficulty falling asleep at night consider stopping the naps for a few days.

Create a protected evening wind-down time

Two hours before bed make a conscious effort to dim room lighting and avoid blue-light emitting screens (like laptops and smartphones), or put these devices into "night" mode AND reduce the brightness of the screen as much as possible. Try and avoid watching the news or doing other activities that are potentially alerting, including physical exercise close to bedtime (some relaxing and breathing exercises are ok). Use this time to do quiet (even boring) tasks like preparing for the next day, tidying up, reading or listening to music quietly, gentle exercise e.g. yoga, stretching. A wind-down time signals your brain to prepare for sleep.

Keep bed for sleep

It can be tempting to stay in bed when there is less structure to our days or as an escape from the challenges we are facing. Keep the number of things you use bed for to a minimum (sleep, sex, pre-sleep relaxation like reading).



Sleep environment

Now is a great time to look at your bedroom or sleep space and see if it needs any adjustments. If noise is a problem, consider using ear plugs. As the weather gets colder adjust the layers on your bed to be warm and comfortable and try to have the bedroom temperature a little cooler than you would if you were up and about. During the day try and ventilate your room by having a window open, even for 15 minutes.



Falling Asleep

Having one long sleep at night is now regarded as normal. However, some of us may have a few hours of sleep, then find ourselves awake for some time, followed by another few hours of sleep. If this happens to you, it is not necessarily a sign that something is wrong. Follow your usual techniques for getting to sleep at the beginning of the night. It may be helpful to get out of bed and do something quiet, in low light levels, until you feel sleepy again. If your night time sleep becomes more fragmented over time, and your ability to function well during the day is affected, you might consider seeking professional help.

Stay physically and mentally active

Humans evolved to be active during the day and sleep at night. Physical activity improves the quality of our sleep and is helpful for managing stress and boosting mood. Even better, combine activity with time outdoors. Try finding a balance between “autopilot” activities (e.g. TV, phone/internet scrolling) and mentally stimulating activities e.g. reading, quizzes, playing music, other hobbies. Engage in regular social interactions with your family, friends and colleagues by phone or through video technology such as Skype or WhatsApp.

Spend time in natural light during daytime



Try to spend at least 30 minutes outside or on your balcony, or if this is not possible, sit next to the window. The best time to do this is in the first half of your waking period. This helps to maintain your body clock in a stable day-night cycle, as well as supporting good mood, wellbeing and sleep quality at night.

Keep an eye on alcohol intake and avoid heavy meals shortly before bedtime

Alcohol can help people fall asleep but it can interfere with the quality and quantity of sleep you get. Heavy meals within 2 hours of bedtime can make it more difficult to fall asleep and may worsen your sleep quality. An early dinner and a light snack later is fine.



Avoid caffeine later in the day

Caffeine is found in coffee, black tea and other products like energy drinks and chocolate. These products can prevent those of us who are sensitive to caffeine from falling asleep or staying asleep at night.

At a time when many things are out of our control, taking care of our sleep health will help us to cope now and make our transition back to less restricted living easier when that time comes.

See our website for links to other helpful sleep health resources and more information sheets about sleep for you and your whānau www.sleepwake.ac.nz.



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