

Sleep during the COVID-19 pandemic

Sleep – our built-in immunity booster



Did you know that sleep is our own natural immune booster – and it's free! There are steps you can take to boost the sleep health of your whānau during times of stress. This is particularly important now to help defend against coronavirus (COVID-19) or other diseases, to help support healing and recovery, as well as to aide mental adaptation to our new social situation. Getting enough good quality sleep is very important for supporting our immune system to work at its best.

It is essential that we all adopt the recommended practices aimed at reducing our chance of getting coronavirus (COVID-19) and therefore limiting its spread (go to <https://covid19.govt.nz/> if you are not sure). Pandemic-related stresses and these social restrictions such as self-isolation and physical distancing are also likely to impact our usual routines, including sleep. Here are some tips to help support your sleep.

Keep bedtime and wake up times regular



We all have an internal time keeping system that keeps our body in step with the 24-hour cycles of night and day. This is known as the circadian biological clock. Many of the processes that occur in our immune system happen at specific times across the 24-hour day. Disruptions to our circadian biological clock can upset the functioning of our immune system. Our circadian biological clock needs day light and predictable daily routines to keep in step with the day/night cycle. Keeping stable sleep and waking patterns is an important part of a predictable daily routine and allows us to get light at regular times during daytime, so that the body clock can stay on top of its immunity duties.

Get plenty of sleep



Researchers in the USA have found that adults who reported short sleep on a regular basis (less than 7 hours per night on average) and poor quality sleep were more likely to develop colds when they were exposed to the cold virus as part of the study. Since many of us are not needing to add commute times to our day, now could be a great time to ensure you are getting plenty of sleep (7-9 hours per night for most adults).

Make the timing, amount and quality of sleep a priority



Not having enough sleep can also affect the way our body responds to a vaccine. Another carefully controlled laboratory study found that people who had the time when they could sleep restricted before and after getting a flu vaccine produced less than half the number of antibodies (special proteins that help fight harmful bacteria and viruses) compared to those who got their usual amount of sleep. This year especially we are all being encouraged to have a flu jab to support our own health and help reduce the load on our health services. Protect your sleep before and after the day of your jab.

Prioritise sleep if you are unwell



Sleep quality and duration also change when we become unwell. We are likely to sleep for longer, because our sleep may be more disturbed and the stages that make up sleep are changed. It is also believed we sleep more when unwell so specialised cells (such as T-cells) can operate for longer and more efficiently each day. T-cells are important immune cells that fight pathogens like the flu, viruses and cancer. During sleep T-cells are more adhesive or sticky. The sticky proteins in T-cells attach to infected cells and kill them. So, getting enough sleep helps our natural in-built immunity to take care of us.



Getting plenty of regular, good quality sleep is also linked to our mood. Having some routines such as getting up and dressed, spending time in day light (either outside or near a window for at least 30 min per day) and regular work times all support sleep and mental health.

Take a look at our separate information sheet on sleep and mental health.

At a time when many things are out of our control, taking care of our sleep health now, and as we re-adjust once restrictions are lifted, is something we can do for ourselves.

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.

