

Sleep during the COVID-19 pandemic

Considerations for Older People



Sleep supports our physical and mental wellbeing and also boosts our body's immune response. The COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions have created challenging times for individuals and society. Changes to our routines and social movements, as well as the stress around the rapidly changing situation, are naturally going to disrupt

sleep. But, as we get used to these, it is important to consider that sleep naturally boosts our immunity and mental coping, helping us to psychologically adapt to our changing circumstances whilst also defending us against disease and supporting healing.

Sleep often becomes more disrupted with ageing. Increased age has also been associated with more severe COVID-19 symptoms. Therefore we need to be particularly mindful of protecting the sleep of older people. Below are some tips with this population in mind.

Maintain regular sleep schedules

We all have an internal body clock that keeps our body and brain in step with the 24-hour cycle of night and day. It is important to support our body clock as this is linked to rhythms of sleep and wake as well as our body's metabolic and immune systems. External time cues are needed to keep the body clock in step. Morning bright light and routine waking activities like exercise and social contact are all important cues for the body clock, supporting our sleep and overall wellbeing.



Many older people (aged 65+ years) report a tendency to sleep at an earlier time of day compared to younger people. It is important to be mindful of preferences around sleep timing and maintain the most efficient sleep possible for yourself or your older family members. If getting outside into natural light and exercising are challenging, consider sitting by a bright window around morning tea-time or doing low impact movements and stretches from a chair. Routine meal times and regular phone calls to family and friends outside of the home can all play a part too.

Getting enough sleep



Researchers have noted links between being consistently sleep deprived and being more likely to become unwell, as well as taking longer to recover from illness. For older adults the recommended amount of sleep each day is 7-8 hours. But many older people report sleeping less, and 5 or 6 hours may be appropriate. Consider how much sleep you or your older family members are accustomed to and think is sufficient for feeling well.

When and how to sleep



While getting the right amount of sleep is important, it is also necessary to consider the quality of sleep and when we do it. During the night we move through different depths and qualities of sleep which together play roles in restoring body and mind. When sleep is disrupted it is less efficient and we can end up still feeling tired in the daytime regardless of how much time was spent in bed.

Many older people report that their sleep is lighter and that they are more easily woken than when they were younger. Periods of wakefulness in the night are therefore more likely. This is also a natural response to the looser schedules and stressors of this time. If sleep is disrupted consider scheduling a nap (ideally less than an hour) after lunch in order to catch up and feel alert for the rest of the day.

Recognise the relationship between sleep and waking life



Maintaining enough good quality sleep is associated with stable mood and waking functioning. Similarly times of stress can effect sleep. Increased worry is normal during a situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This may hinder being able to get to sleep or may take you longer to fall asleep which in turn can increase daytime sleepiness compared to usual.

Research has found that when older people have disturbed sleep they are also more likely to feel irritable or sad as well as be more forgetful or have accidents, e.g. falls. It is important to acknowledge the impact sleep can have on how we feel and function. Allow yourself or older family members time to catch up on rest when needed.

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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