

Sleep

One or two bad nights will make you tired the next day but won't harm your health. Poor sleep over weeks or months certainly can.

You:

- feel tired all the time
- drop off during the day
- can't concentrate
- can't make decisions
- start to feel depressed
- can be dangerous if you are driving or operating heavy machinery.

Poor sleep makes you more likely to get high blood pressure, diabetes and to be overweight.

To sleep better, make sure that you:

- have a comfortable bedroom – not too hot, not too cold, not too noisy
- have a mattress that supports you properly
- get some exercise: start slowly with some regular swimming or walking, best in the late afternoon or early evening
- take some time to relax properly before going to bed
- don't take alcohol, slimming tablets or street drugs like Ecstasy, cocaine and amphetamines
- try writing down any worries before going to bed and then tell yourself to deal with them tomorrow
- get up if you can't sleep, and do something you find relaxing – read, watch television or listen to quiet music; after a while you should feel tired enough to go to get back to sleep
- if your sleep routine has been disrupted by shift work, jet lag or having a small baby, try to wake up quite early, at the same time every morning, whatever time you fell asleep the night before. Make sure that you don't go to bed again before about 10 pm that night. After a few nights you should start to fall asleep naturally at the right time.

If you try these tips and still can't sleep, see your doctor.

Treatments

- Sleeping tablets don't work for very long, they leave you tired and irritable the next day and lose their effect quite quickly, so they tend to be addictive. They should only be used for short periods (less than 2 weeks), for instance if you are so distressed that you cannot sleep at all.
- Antidepressants can be helpful but have their own side-effects.
- Over the counter medicines often contain an antihistamine. These do work but can make you sleepy well into the next morning and you also tend to need to take more and more to get the same effect. It is best not to take antihistamines continuously for a long time. Herbal remedies (e.g. Valerian) work best if you take them every night for 2 to 3 weeks or more rather than just taking them occasionally.
- Cognitive-behavioural therapy can help. It involves looking at unhelpful ways of thinking that can make you more anxious.

Tiredness

At any given time, one in every five people feel unusually tired and one in ten have prolonged fatigue. It is often due to poor sleep, but not always. The reasons can be:

Physical

- being overweight – your body has to work harder just to do everyday things
- being underweight – your muscles aren't strong enough to do everyday things
- doing too little and getting unfit
- doing too much and tiring yourself out – if you carry on doing things, whether physical or mental, even when you feel tired, you may find it harder to recover and get even more tired
- any illness can make you tired, including:
 - anaemia
 - chronic infections
 - cancer
 - liver, heart or long-term chest problems
 - diabetes or thyroid problems: hypothyroidism
 - muscular: myositis, multiple sclerosis
 - narcolepsy or sleep apnoea

- treatments – serious operations on your abdomen or chest, medications like beta-blockers and strong painkillers, radiotherapy and chemotherapy
- pregnancy and breast feeding.

Psychological

- worry or stress, especially if you can't see a way out of your problems
- depression tends to make you feel tired all the time, especially if you are waking too early in the morning
- everyday difficulties but even positive events (e.g. moving home or getting married) can be exhausting
- emotional shock such as bad news, bereavement or the break-up of a relationship
- expecting too much of yourself – you find yourself repeatedly failing, feeling frustrated and tired
- habits – you sleep during the day, sleep too much or do too much then rest too much.

Life

- If your child doesn't sleep through the night, it can be really hard work just to keep going with the daily routine.
- Night work will often make you tired, especially if shifts are often changed.

Other reasons for tiredness

A small number of people suffer from severe and disabling tiredness that goes on for a long time and for which there is no clear cause. This is called myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) or chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS).

Helping yourself

- Try the sleeping tips listed above.
- Get some exercise, cut out caffeine and get back to a normal weight.
- Plan your week and spread your chores so that you don't get exhausted.
- Have realistic expectations for yourself.
- If you have been tired for a long time, don't expect to be back to normal overnight. Take small steps and don't expect too much too soon. Any progress is good, however small it may seem at the time.