Sleep In The Time of COVID-19: Advice for NHS Staff

Sleep, rest and relaxation are essential to keep us working at our best. This is even more true, not less, when faced with a challenge on the scale of the coronavirus pandemic.

When we are under pressure, and become stressed and worried, being able to rest, relax, and to sleep well becomes more difficult. Many of us will find it harder to get to sleep, to stay asleep and to get good quality sleep over the next few months.

It's important to remember that how we are feeling, and how our minds and bodies are responding, is a normal response to an extraordinary situation. Where it isn't possible to change the circumstances we find ourselves dealing with, it becomes even more important to look at strategies to maintain the best quality sleep we can.

Relaxation/Winding Down

One of the functions of sleep is to process what we have done in the day. Where our days have been stressed and pressured, sleep becomes more vulnerable.

Strategies and techniques to help relax and unwind are essential to offload daytime stresses (NHS Employers are curating a list of free-to-access apps for NHS staff that can help with this here) Incorporating these strategies and techniques into your daily routine, and using them when you feel particularly stressed, can help reduce the impact of daytime stress. Stick also to your existing strategies to relax and unwind, whatever they may be. Don't be tempted to let these slide in these exceptional circumstances.

It's important to talk about how we are thinking and feeling, particularly as many of us will be working outwith our normal 'comfort zones' at work. We will likely see and do things that make us feel distressed, or as if we have failed to deliver care to our normal standards. This is again, a normal response to extraordinary circumstances, and is not a personal failing. For most of us, talking about this, and sharing our experiences, will be an essential part of how we cope. For good sleep however, it's important not to do this too close to bedtime.

Watching the news and using social media can be important to help us keep up, to stay connected and feel part of the bigger picture. However information overload, especially about things we have no control over, can raise our anxiety level which can be counterproductive for sleep. Aim to put boundaries around specific times in the day that are free of media, and try not to engage in pandemic-related media before bed, or when waking overnight. We may not be able to stop our minds from churning over information, but at least we won't be adding to the overload.

Rest

Dealing with the coronavirus pandemic is something that will take many months. This is a marathon relay, not a sprint, and each of us will play our part in full over the span of the pandemic. It is essential therefore that we pace ourselves, and not exhaust our personal reserves in the first days and weeks of our efforts – a sprint pace in the first few miles of a marathon will make the remaining miles even harder.

Regular days away from work will be essential to keep us all mentally and physically healthy, and to ensure we continue to give our patients the best of us. On days when we are not at work, other members of the team will take their turn, and it's important not to feel guilty when others are working and we are not.

Within shifts, regular breaks are just as important to keep us functioning at our best; they allow us to 'recharge' ourselves. Think of it like keeping your mobile phone battery in the 'green' zone ... you don't want to let yourself drop into the 'red'.

Basic Sleep Routine/Habit Advice
Good core sleep routine and habits ("sleep hygiene") are the foundation of quality sleep, and the stronger these are, the better able you are likely to be to maintain sleep under stress.

Your core sleep routine is your normal routine when not working irregular shifts – for most adults this will include a sleep period between roughly 2200-2300 to 0600-0700.

Your Sleep Requirement
Everyone's need for sleep is slightly different, and unique to them. The median amount of sleep needed by adults is 7-8 hours, but individual sleep requirement can range from 6-10 hours.

An adult who needs 10 hours of sleep but gets 7 hours will be as sleep-deprived as someone who needs 7 hours of sleep and gets 5. Knowing how much sleep **you** need to function at your best, and trying to schedule this amount of sleep as often as possible, is key when working out your ideal sleep routine. (Think about how much sleep you get when on holiday – this is often more than you would get on a normal work night, and is probably closer to how much sleep you **actually** need)

When you don't get the right amount of sleep for you, your ability to function in the daytime is affected. If you miss just one hour of sleep every night (eg getting 6 hours instead of 7) this means you miss the equivalent of an entire night's sleep each week. This can result in effects on your physical health, including your immune system – but it also affects your cognitive function and emotional regulation. When dealing with high-pressure, high-consequence situations, making sure you have had the right amount of sleep means you are most likely to be best able to handle them to the best of your ability.

Good sleep habits
Basic good habits help support good core sleep.

More detail about good sleep for shiftworkers can be found [here](#)

Key points:
- Keep a consistent routine for bedtime and, especially, wake time. This doesn't need to be absolute, and some flexibility is fine, but generally aim to go to bed at roughly the same time each night and wake at the same time each day. A small amount of catch-up sleep on days off can help (1-2 hours later than your normal wake time), but having too long a lie-in in the morning can make it more difficult to get to sleep at your normal bedtime.
- Get as much natural light exposure as possible, particularly first thing in the morning. This helps to keep your body clock 'in sync'
- Stick to regular exercise routines as much as you can; exercise can help with both your physical and mental health, as well as your sleep.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, and stay hydrated, especially when at work
- Take regular breaks in the daytime – if you are over-tired at bedtime, sleep will often be more difficult. Try to get outside if possible during breaks.
- Use your preferred relaxation strategies, particularly in the last hour before bedtime. Use mindfulness/relaxation techniques as you fall into sleep.

- Restrict your use of electronic screen devices in the hour before bedtime. Try to remove screens from your bedroom. If you are not officially 'on-call', set your phone to 'Do Not Disturb' from 10pm onwards. Don't use your phone as your alarm clock
- Close curtains/blinds and use dim lights in the latter part of the evening
- Limit caffeine use, particularly after midday. Too much caffeine later in the day can affect sleep quality
- Limit alcohol use – a small amount of alcohol after finishing a shift can help some people to relax, but more alcohol, particularly if closer to bedtime, can affect sleep quality
- Before starting your bedtime routine, write a "to-do" list of things you need to do tomorrow – get them out of your head before trying to sleep
- A hot bath or shower just before bedtime can help encourage sleep onset
- Make your bedroom as quiet, dark and comfortable as possible
  Use blackout blinds or eye masks (especially if trying to sleep in the day)
  Use earplugs, or ambient background noise (white/pink noise)

Nightwaking
When we are stressed and under pressure, it is normal to wake in the night and find it difficult to get back to sleep. Again, this is a normal response to extraordinary circumstances!

Relaxation and mindfulness strategies (eg Headspace) can help you to get back to sleep, especially if you have already made these strategies part of your normal bedtime routine, as your brain will associate the routine of doing this with going to sleep.

If you are still struggling to get back to sleep, it is better to get out of bed and do something to distract your mind. Avoid turning on bright lights (or going on your phone!) but get up, walk around, read a magazine, do some puzzles, build some LEGO – anything to take your mind off the fact that you have woken up. Then take yourself back to bed after a while, and go through your relaxation routine again.

Sometimes you will still not get back to sleep. If that happens, simply accept it, get up and start your day, and remind yourself that tonight is another night and you are likely to sleep better then. Don't put too much pressure on yourself and just stick to your normal routines.

Medication
Medication is not an alternative to the non-pharmacological advice and strategies outlined above and their usefulness without good sleep routine/habits is very limited.

Under normal circumstances, we do **not** recommend using medication to aid sleep in the absence of a diagnosed sleep disorder/disease. Medication use can become habit-forming, and can cause next-day drowsiness.

These are not normal circumstances.

Where possible, medications to support sleep should be prescribed by your own doctor, however this may not be an option during this period. **If you have pre-existing medical conditions or are on prescribed medication, you should discuss with your doctor/pharmacist before starting any new medicines, including those available without prescription.**

Natural Sleep Remedies
Lavender can be used to help relax in the evening and, if used in the bedroom, the brain can learn to associate it with sleep, which can help support getting back to sleep if you wake in the night

Valerian is a herbal remedy which can support sleep onset and sleep maintenance for some people, though overall evidence of efficacy remains unclear. It is most likely to be effective when taken regularly, with improvements taking 1-2 weeks to be evident. It is more likely to be effective as part of an overall strategy of good sleep routine and habits.

Melatonin
Melatonin is a prescription only medicine in the UK. It can be obtained online, but the quality and integrity of these products cannot be assured and we would normally recommend against their use.

Melatonin can help you to get to sleep but it does not usually significantly increase the amount of sleep you will get. Melatonin's effect is relatively weak and is most likely to work when used in conjunction with good overall routine and habits for sleep, particularly relaxation strategies. It is unlikely to be effective if you are significantly anxious/stressed at bedtime.

Light, particularly electronic screen device light, can neutralise natural melatonin production and its effect, and should be avoided for the hour before bed.

Dose is unique to an individual, and is not dependent on age, sex or weight. Higher doses of melatonin are not intrinsically better and a dose of 1-3 mg, taken 30 minutes before the time you plan to go to bed, usually works best to support sleep onset.

If working a rotating shift pattern, melatonin is best used after finishing night shifts to support returning to your normal sleep routine/time. Melatonin taken at other times is unlikely to be helpful, and may cause additional sleep problems.

Diphenhydramine
Diphenhydramine is a sedating anti-histamine which can be bought from pharmacies. It is licensed for short term use (eg 1-2 nights) but evidence of efficacy overall is weak and its use can be habit forming. It does not work for everyone (and can cause paradoxical stimulation for some)

See NHS.UK for more information on diphenhydramine

Medical Review
If you have significant persistent sleep difficulties, you should see your GP or a member of your Occupational Health team; it is better to acknowledge and address problems rather than ignoring them or trying to "carry on regardless".

Good luck. Most important of all, be kind to yourselves and others. Our best support will be, as always, our family, colleagues and friends and, by looking out for each other, we will get through this.

Dr Mike Farquhar