


Sleep Changes As You Grow Older

As you age, there are normal changes that occur in your sleep patterns and sleep quality, such as:

- It can take longer to fall asleep.
- You may wake up more often, and find it more difficult to fall asleep.
- Everyday noises like barking dogs can disrupt your sleep more easily than when you were younger.
- The total amount of sleep you need does not change as you age, but you may experience less deep sleep.
- Instead of sleeping in one block, you may tend to nap more and sleep less at night.
- You may wake up at least once for a trip to the bathroom, especially if you are over 65.
- You are more likely to doze off while watching TV, reading the newspaper or even just relaxing.

Because of the expected changes in sleep with aging, it can be difficult to determine if the changes you are experiencing are normal or due to an actual sleep disorder. As you age, you are more likely to have chronic medical illnesses and take prescription or over-the-counter medications that disrupt your sleep. Finally, you may tend to gain some weight as you age, and obesity can affect medical illnesses as well as increase the risk of other sleep disorders.

Typical illnesses that affect sleep include:

- Breathing diseases like asthma, emphysema and chronic bronchitis
- Heart diseases like coronary artery disease, heart failure and atrial fibrillation
- Neurological diseases like Parkinson's disease and stroke
- Painful conditions like arthritis
- Psychiatric disorders like anxiety and depression

Certain medications used to treat medical problems can disrupt your sleep. Changes in the timing or amount of certain medications can alter your sleep. As you age, your body's ability to handle medications changes, making it more likely that those medications can affect your sleep or alertness levels during the day. You may decide to try prescription or over-the-counter sleep aids. Please be cautious when using these sleep aids since they can increase your risk of falling at night and may result in confusion or memory loss during the daytime.

Certain sleep disorders are more common in older individuals.

- Insomnia is the most common sleep disorder and has various causes, including medical illness, medications and other sleep disorders. Changes in living situations or the loss of a spouse, close friend or other family member can trigger insomnia. Hospitalizations, recovery after an operation or traveling can disrupt sleep and even lead to long term insomnia. A change in your daily routine, such as retirement, often affects your sleeping patterns. Serious concerns about finances or end-of-life issues can also disrupt your ability to sleep.
- Advanced sleep phase syndrome occurs when you experience a shift in sleep patterns that causes you to go to bed earlier and get up earlier. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it might not be desirable. It can be frustrating to be awake early in the morning while others are still sleeping. It can also be difficult to stay awake later in the evening when you want to take part in social activities.
- Sleep apnea occurs when your throat briefly collapses during sleep, making it difficult to breathe while asleep. You may not be aware of this disruption because it only occurs while you are sleeping. A spouse or bed partner might notice regular snoring or observed pauses in breathing during sleep. This disorder can cause sleepiness during the daytime and dozing off when you would normally be awake. Some patients with sleep apnea wake with headaches, or have insomnia, night sweats, nighttime heartburn, memory problems, difficulty concentrating, irritability or low sex drive. Sleep apnea can also increase your risk of high blood pressure, heart attack, irregular heart rhythm or stroke.
- Restless legs syndrome is a neurological condition that can disrupt sleep and is more common in older patients. It results in a strong urge to move your legs, especially in the evening. Moving your legs can temporarily relieve your discomfort. Sometimes, this disorder is brought on or made worse by certain medical conditions or medications.
- Sleepwalking can occur at any age, but certain types of sleepwalking disorders occur more commonly as you age. Some neurological disorders or medications can contribute to sleepwalking in older individuals.

Since it can be difficult to tell if you are experiencing changes in sleep because of normal aging or because of another sleep disorder, we recommend you talk to your primary care doctor about any symptoms you are having. Your doctor can help you decide if seeing a sleep disorders specialist would be beneficial.

Sleep Medicine Center of Kansas is an American Academy of Sleep Medicine Accredited Sleep Center

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