

## How to Improve Sleep in Adults aged 65 and over



### Why read this?

According to the National Sleep Foundation, the ideal sleep range for an older adult (>65 years) is between 7 and 8 hours but 5-6 or 9 hours sleep a night is appropriate for some.<sup>1</sup> Figure 1 shows that the ideal sleep duration of older adults does not decrease significantly from that of adults aged 26-64, e.g. 7 to 9 hours per night.

That said, various factors can disrupt sleep as we grow older.

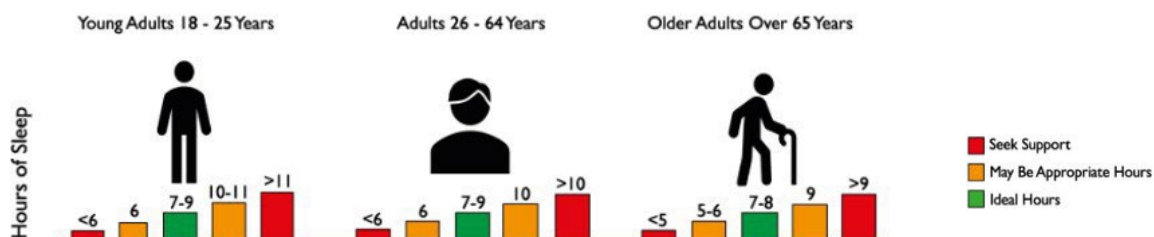


Figure 1. National Sleep Foundation<sup>1</sup> Sleep duration recommendations: 'Ideal', 'may be appropriate' and 'seek support' sleep durations per night by age

## What can affect sleep health?

Sleep becomes more fragile and we are more likely to encounter difficulty sleeping. We can typically expect to go to bed and wake up earlier, for our sleep to be lighter and to be less tolerant of jet lag.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, we go through changes in our physiology, e.g. menopause, that can accentuate sleep disturbance. You can read more about the sources of sleep disruption associated with ageing in the information sheet titled 'How sleep changes as we get older: for adults 26-64 years old'.<sup>2</sup>

Research suggests that healthy ageing is key to maintaining good sleep health.<sup>3</sup> In older adults, disturbed sleep and sleep difficulties are largely due to underlying illnesses.<sup>3</sup> For example, 67%-75% of adults aged 65 years or more have two or more chronic medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease, lung disease, cancer, diabetes, and dementia. Moreover, about 40% of adults over the age of 65 take five or more medications to treat underlying conditions and associated pain.<sup>4</sup> Diuretics for high blood lead to nocturnal awakenings and many common medications can disrupt sleep as a side effect. More information and advice on this topic are available [here](#)

Sleep disorders such as insomnia, sleep apnoea, restless leg syndrome and rapid eye movement behaviour disorder are common in older adults. They can cause significant daytime sleepiness and therefore impact daily activities and quality of life.<sup>3</sup> Insomnia is chronic lack of sleep, sleep apnoea can cause pauses in breathing during sleep, restless leg syndrome causes an urge to move the legs during sleep and rapid eye movement behaviour disorder causes people to act out their dreams. You can find out more about sleep disorders in the information sheet titled: 'How to seek professional support to improve chronic sleep difficulties'.<sup>5</sup>

There are factors over and above age-related changes to sleep and physical health that contribute to poor sleep in older adults. Over the age of 65, we are more likely to be retired and can also expect changes to our lifestyle and social engagements. It is therefore important to find ways to cope with such changes, e.g. new routines and roles, in order to maintain good sleep health.

## Tips for sleeping well in our older years

In conjunction with the advice in 'How sleep changes as we get older: for adults 26-64 years old', the following tips can help you to sleep well as you grow older. They focus on improving daytime and sleep habits to promote sleep health.

### Maintain good health

- **Seek professional help:** Make sure you have regular medical checks, particularly for age-related diseases. Treatment and social support are key to dealing with underlying illnesses and sleep disorders.<sup>2,5</sup> Undiagnosed sleep disorders are common among older adults, e.g. 20 – 30%<sup>2</sup>, therefore, it is important to seek professional support if you are not sleeping well. For more information on how to recognise common sleep disorders and how to seek professional support, read the information sheet titled: 'How to seek professional support to improve chronic sleep difficulties'.<sup>5</sup>

- **Keep active during the day:** Maintain physical exercise, preferably outdoors. This reduces the desire to nap in the afternoon and helps with getting up later in the morning. With retirement, we tend to nap for longer than 20 minutes after lunch, taking advantage of the 'post-lunch dip' in our circadian rhythm which makes us feel sleepy. Napping in the afternoon reduces the amount of sleep needed at night. Coupled with our morning 'lark' tendency we still fall asleep at 9 pm but wake up at 4 am. A recent review found that moderate intensity exercise with a frequency of three times per week and a program duration of 12 weeks up to 6 months, improved sleep duration and quality in older adults aged over 60.<sup>6</sup>
- **Maintain a healthy diet:** A balanced diet and keeping a healthy weight are key factors in maintaining good health together with moderation in alcohol intake and being a non-smoker.<sup>2</sup> Apart from weight management, healthy eating can help to control or delay health issues associated with ageing such as high blood pressure and diabetes. Advice on how to maintain a healthy diet can be found [here](#)

### Think differently

- **About sleep:** If not getting enough sleep is a source of worry, the 'Am I getting good quality sleep?'<sup>7</sup> information sheet can help us be more realistic about our sleep need and realise we are just short sleepers within the sleep range recommendations for our age. Moreover, if we add the amount of time we sleep in the afternoon to the amount of time we sleep at night, we also realise we are getting enough sleep over 24 hours and there is no cause for concern.
- **About light:** Where possible, spending more time outdoors in natural light can help lift our mood and consolidate sleep at night.<sup>8</sup> As we spend considerable time indoors, especially in winter and during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is important that spaces are brightly lit. Research has shown that exposure to bright light during the day helps to cement the circadian rhythm to the 24 h day improving sleep, alertness and mood in different settings, e.g. care homes and offices.<sup>9,10</sup> The importance of exposure to bright light during the day for sleep and health is explained [here](#)

### Stay involved

- **Socialise:** Maintain social relationships and use technologies to stay socially engaged. Connecting with others via technology is especially important during times of isolation and has helped many during the Covid-19 pandemic. Social relationships can help us live a longer and healthier life.<sup>11</sup> Further information and advice on using technology to keep connected during Covid-19 are available [here](#)
- **Find a new fit:** While retirement from work is a happy experience, some may find adjusting to such major life change difficult. The transition to retirement can make some people feel less engaged with the outside world and this may be reflected in changes to their sleep habits, such as napping and earlier bedtimes. These habits are amplified with advanced age and may lead to sleep problems. Advice on how to make the most of retirement to enhance well-being can be found [here](#)

Detailed advice on how to improve sleep can be found in the information sheet 'How to adjust my daily patterns of light exposure, meals and exercise to improve sleep'.<sup>12</sup>

## To Summarise

Physiological and lifestyle changes can make sleep more difficult as we grow older. Understanding how to recognise, minimise and manage sleep disruption helps us to adjust to sleep changes. Dealing with underlying conditions which may affect sleep, improving daytime and sleep habits, and getting the right social support, can all help us to adjust to sleep changes at times of life transitions.

## What Should I Read Next?

Healthy ageing starts in our younger years by looking after our physical and mental well-being as much as possible. For more information of how sleep can be improved at different ages read our information sheets:

- How sleep changes as we get older: for adults 26-64 years old<sup>2</sup>
- How to help young children with sleep<sup>13</sup>
- How can I help my teenager to get more sleep and feel less tired?<sup>14</sup>

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## About the Author: check author

*Dr Cristina Ruscitto is a Senior Researcher at Baines Simmons. She specialises in the psycho-behavioural predictors of jet lag and fatigue in the aviation sector. Her role involves fatigue management training, the development of fatigue surveys and survey analysis, the scientific study of roster patterns to quantify fatigue risk as well as writing evidence-based recommendations to improve sleep in different operational settings. Cristina is a Chartered member of the British Psychological Society and an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.*

## About the Reviewers:

*Sarah Booth, Senior Research Manager*

Sarah Booth is a Senior Research Manager at Baines Simmons. A specialist in human performance in the aviation and aerospace environments, Sarah has worked with aviation operators to develop and implement Fatigue Risk Management Systems (FRMS) across multiple regulatory environments. A regular speaker at both academic and industry conferences, Sarah is also a trainer, delivering to operators in the implementation of Fatigue Risk Management, as well as courses in the use of biomathematical modelling.

*Dr Alexandra Holmes, Research Director*

Dr Alexandra Holmes is Research Director at Baines Simmons, specialising in scientific safety cases and the implementation of Fatigue Risk Management Systems (FRMS) in aviation. With a PhD exploring the health effects of sleep loss and shift work, Alex is a current member of the ICAO Helicopter Fatigue Management Task Force and assists the UK CAA and Irish CAA to evaluate FRMS applications and safety cases.

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For further information on our Fatigue Risk Management Research, Training and Consultancy services contact + 44 (0) 203 805 7792, [hello@bainessimmons.com](mailto:hello@bainessimmons.com)