

Sleep Issues in Elderly

- It is common for older adults to experience sleep issues.
- This is due to the alteration in sleep pattern that occurs as part of normal aging, causing changes in the quality and duration of sleep.
- Some of the changes that occur with aging is increase sleep latency (increasing time to fall asleep), increase nighttime wakefulness, earlier waking time, increase daytime napping, reduce stage of deep sleep and increase stage of light sleep.
- Elderly are also more prone to medical conditions that can affect sleep such as dementia, depression, overactive bladder (increase urinary frequency at night) and certain medical conditions affecting the breathing at night such as sleep apnea and heart problems.
- Sleep is important as lack of sleep will impair memory, concentration, increase fatigue which will lead to increase fall risk and reduce overall well being.



What causes sleep problem at night?

- Taking long naps during the day
- Taking too much caffeine especially in the late evening/night
- Too much stimulation before bedtime
- Went to bed hungry
- Environmental factor - too cold / hot / bright / noisy
- Medical conditions affecting sleep. Ie: Sleep apnoea, heart failure (difficulties in breathing while asleep), depression, dementia, overactive bladder, pain

Most people only sleep 6-8 hours at night. If they go to bed too early, it is normal that they will be awake earlier or even wake up in the middle of the night.



Sleep Hygiene

During the day:

- Set routine wake up time
- Set daily routine
- Regular meal hour
- Limit daytime nap to 1-2 hours only
- Plan activities to stay awake in the day, ie: Exercise, outings.
- For patients with dementia, can consider stretching exercises, reminisce old photos, helping out in simple house chores like fold clothes, wash vegetables
- Turn on the light to brighten the room
- Avoid caffeinated drink after 2pm
- Avoid spending time on bed when not sleeping



During bedtime:

- Set routine bedtime
- Go to bed only when sleepy, do not use bed for reading/watching TV
- Avoid using light-emitting screens before bedtime (handphone/laptop)
- Avoid drinking too much water 2 hours before bedtime and empty the bladder before going to bed
- Light snack if hungry
- Ensure preferred room temperature
- Ensure bedroom is not too bright/noisy
- Wear loose/comfortable clothing
- May try aroma therapy



Should I ask doctor for sleeping pills?

- All medications have their side effects and negative impact on the body. Try with a good sleep hygiene first.
- For sleep medications, ideally to be taken 1 hour before scheduled bedtime. For example, for someone with dementia, if the sleep medication is taken at 6pm, they might feel sleepy and go bed at 7pm, and then wake up at 3am. Hence, time the medication just 1 hour before bedtime.
- Consult a doctor if sleep problem persist despite a good sleep hygiene. In patients with dementia, consult a doctor if the sleep problem is affecting the individual well being or causing significant stress to family members, ie: shouting, agitation or wandering at night.

