

# Do you have difficulty getting to sleep?

# Do you have any problems with staying asleep?

Although you are not aware of disturbed sleep, it is worth considering the factors which can cause disturbed sleep, as by paying attention to them you may improve the quality of your sleep.

**Do you eat a late meal 2-3 hours before your bedtime?** Whilst going to bed with a full stomach will certainly lead to disturbed sleep, so will an empty one.

**Do you drink alcohol within 2-3 hours of bedtime?** Know that the “night cap” has a price. Alcohol may help you to get to sleep but it will cause you to wake up throughout the night. You may not notice it. (It is worse if you have sleep apnoea because the alcohol makes the apnoea worse.) Alcohol may also lead to snoring.

**Do you snore or ever wake up because of breathing difficulties?** If you have a sleeping partner, ask them if they notice any snoring or pauses in breathing. You may have a sleep disorder or you may just need to increase your awareness about your own sleep need. If you have any concerns see your doctor.

**Do you wake several times during the night for no apparent reason, or suddenly awake and cannot get back to sleep, or wake early in the morning before you would really like to do so?** While sleep problems do not mean that you are suffering from depression, there is no doubt that sleep disorders are a prime symptom of depression. If you are finding that you are frequently waking up during the night and not able to get back to sleep and this is associated with feeling depressed and anxious, then you should consult your doctor.

**Do you grind your teeth when sleeping?** Teeth grinding? Maybe its proper name sounds better - bruxism. It is a more common complaint than one would imagine. There are a number of causes, but sleep disorders and stress come high on the list. So whilst there is no cure as such for the problem, dealing with the underlying stress and sleep disorders will do much to reduce the problem.

**Do you find it difficult to keep your legs still, or feel restless?** Restless Leg Syndrome is a strange condition which becomes more common with age. The sufferer, shortly after going to bed, or during the night, feels an irresistible urge to move the lower limbs. Doing so relieves the sensation, but as he or she relaxes again, the sensation returns. It can be extremely troublesome and very disturbing to sleep. Whilst it may seem a psychological problem, research has shown it to be associated with quite definite activity in certain parts of the brain. There are some medical treatments available, but they are of variable effectiveness. The best and simplest solution is often to get up and do something which does tax your brain a bit - read for a while, write a letter. Sounds an odd thing to do and contrary to other advice given in this section, but it does frequently work.



**Do you sleep walk?** Sleep walking is more common in children, but not unknown in adults. Unlike nightmares, it tends to occur during deeper non-REM sleep and is therefore more likely to occur when the person is excessively tired. Stress and alcohol have been shown to contribute significantly to the problem, so these areas should be addressed if sleep walking is a problem.

**Do nightmares frequently disturb your sleep?** During sleep your mind goes through various stages, one being known as REM (Rapid Eye Movement) sleep. While you dream throughout the night it is during REM sleep that the dreams are most intense. Some dreams are pleasant, some downright confusing or weird and a minority are very unpleasant - nightmares. These can result in you awakening abruptly in a cold sweat and with a racing pulse.

**What causes them?** Various theories abound, with stress and worries playing a big part. However other factors, such as frightening things being uppermost in your mind, will also cause your dreams to be alarming. Discomfort due to caffeine intake or large meals and alcohol late at night will also contribute to the problem. We all have the odd nightmare. It is when they occur regularly that the underlying cause has to be identified and treated.

**Is your sleep disturbed by having to get up to pass urine?** Males - You seem to have noticed some change in passing urine. There are a number of possible causes for this - often with a simple explanation. If the problem is causing you some concern, discuss it with your doctor. As many as 80% of males will suffer some problems with their prostate, a walnut sized gland lying at the base of the bladder, with the majority being due to a benign condition which causes an increase in the size of the gland. In turn this causes problems with passing urine. Whilst some will require surgical intervention, many can be treated with drugs. The important point to is to not ignore the condition. A small percentage can be due to malignancy, which can be treated if discovered early enough. Even if it is not malignant, ignoring the condition can cause other urinary tract problems.

**Do night sweats associated with the menopause disturb your sleep?** (Women only) Night sweats and hot flushes are a distressing symptom of the menopause and, if very troublesome, the best treatment is undoubtedly hormone replacement therapy (HRT). The pros and cons of this are beyond the scope of this item. Simple measures include avoiding a hot bedroom and excessive bedding, but are not particularly effective. Drug treatment (other than HRT) includes clonidine, which is only moderately effective and is not without its own side effects. A number of herbal remedies are available, but there has been little good research into their efficacy and they are not licensed as medical products.

