

Sleep

DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Advice for Adults & Children

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City of Westminster



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KENSINGTON
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The reason for this guidance

During the coronavirus pandemic, many people have found their sleep patterns have been disrupted due to stress, worry, and no longer going out to school or work. Such a disruption can especially impact children and adults who are sensitive to changes in routine. If your usual sleep patterns have gone off-course during the pandemic, be reassured that you are not alone in this.

The following is guidance on how to promote good sleep habits during the pandemic, and beyond.



Why is sleep so important?

When we are sleeping our body is building energy, fixing and repairing, preparing us to be fit and ready for another day.



During sleep, our immune system releases certain proteins called *cytokines*, which are important for fighting infections and inflammation, and help us respond to stress. However, when we don't get enough sleep or our sleep is disrupted, our bodies produce fewer of these important proteins. Lack of sleep can also affect how quickly we recover if we do become unwell.

Good quality sleep also helps promote good emotional and mental health. Poor sleep is linked to mental health difficulties such as anxiety and depression.

Sleep is vitally important in terms of learning. During sleep, the brain sorts out and stores important information - this is how memories are created. Adults and children who experience inadequate sleep are more likely to have problems paying attention, forgetting things and keeping up with work.



How much sleep do we need?

We spend up to one-third of our lives asleep. Sleep is a vital indicator of overall health and well-being. Although research cannot pinpoint a precise amount of sleep needed by people at different ages, there are "rule-of-thumb" amounts experts agree upon:



- ◆ *Newborns (0-3 months) need 14-17 hours sleep.*
- ◆ *Infants (4-11 months) need 12-15 hours sleep.*
- ◆ *Toddlers (1-2 years) need 11-14 hours sleep.*
- ◆ *Preschoolers (3-5 years) need 10-13 hours of sleep.*
- ◆ *School-age children (6-13 years) need 9-11 hours sleep.*
- ◆ *Teenagers (14-17 years old) need 8-10 hours sleep.*
- ◆ *Adults need 7-9 hours sleep.*



Routine

Routine is the most important factor in getting a good night sleep. *“Routine is the guardian of good sleep. It protects our sleep.”* - Kevin Morgan, Professor of Psychology, Loughborough University.



During this current time, try as much as possible to preserve your sleep pattern for you and your family. Ideally, you should have the same sleep / wake time 7 days a week. If you do wish to go to bed later on weekends, try and move your sleep / wake times by *no more than an hour*- i.e. go to sleep no more 1 hour than you usually would, and get up no more than 1 hour than you usually would.

For children, establish and maintain a bedtime routine each evening that is short and predictable. Start the routine 15-30 minutes before the set bedtime. The routine should take place in the child’s bedroom where it is quiet (other than bathing / teeth-brushing activities, etc).



Light

Right now we can't go outside as much as we used to. Our eyes need exposure to outdoor light because of a hormone in our body called *melatonin* which regulates our sleep and wake pattern. Staying indoors for a long time can reduce our melatonin levels, which can then disrupt our sleep.



When you wake up in the morning, open the blinds or curtains and make sure lots of natural light is getting into your home. Stand by an open window, or if you have a balcony or garden try and use this space to get exposure to natural light. If you do go out to exercise, try not to use sunglasses. Getting exposure to natural light will improve the quality of your sleep and your mood.

At night, the bedroom should be comfortable, quiet, and dark. Make sure you are closing the curtains or blinds. Some children may benefit from children's ear plugs and a soft eye mask to block out sound & light during the night.



Screens

Some research suggests that the *blue light* emitted from screens suppresses *melatonin*, an important hormone which helps regulate our sleep and wake pattern. Make sure you turn off all screens (television, phones, tablets, etc) *1 hour before bedtime*.



Try and engage in calming and soothing activities before bed that prepare the body and mind for sleep. Help yourself and your child to ‘wind down’ before bed by reading a book together, doing stretching exercises, or listening to gentle music, for example.

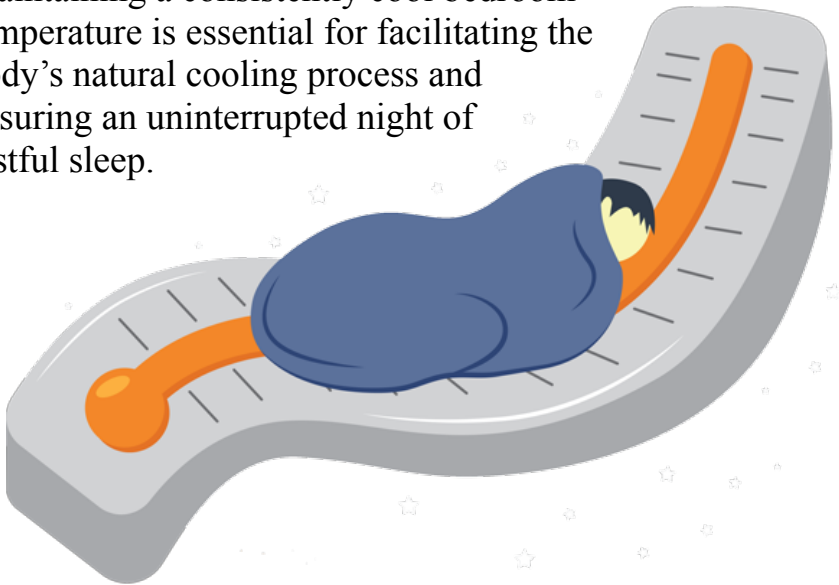


Environment

If you are able to, reserve bedrooms strictly for sleep so that you and your children associate these with falling asleep. Avoid doing work or watching television in bedrooms, if you can.

Set the temperature at night to somewhere in the 15-19 degrees celsius. A cool-down in temperature signals to the brain that it's time to get ready for bed and kickstarts melatonin production, the hormone responsible for regulating our sleep.

Maintaining a consistently cool bedroom temperature is essential for facilitating the body's natural cooling process and ensuring an uninterrupted night of restful sleep.



Diet & Exercise

Exercise during the day helps you sleep better at night and also boosts the immune system. Children and adults who exercise find it easier to fall asleep at night and have deeper sleep. Make sure the time for exercise is earlier in the day, as stimulating exercise close to bedtime may make it harder to fall asleep.



In terms of diet, if adults or children consume caffeinated foods or drinks (e.g., chocolate, coffee, tea, fizzy drinks) in the afternoon or evening, they may have difficulty sleeping, so limit these.



Stress

This is currently a very stressful and worrying time for adults and children - it is natural to feel this way. Stress and worry can affect the quality of our sleep. It is therefore important to acknowledge these anxieties, and remember that these feelings are normal.



The use of a ‘worry jar’ may help children with these anxieties- this is where your child can write any thoughts or worries they have on notes, which can then be placed in a special jar. These can then be discussed with the child at a set time each day, for a set time.



Contact our service

The Educational Psychologist Consultation Service (EPCS) is available for advice, guidance and support, through a child's school SENCo contacting their link EP in the first instance, or a senior management team member. Any questions about the guidelines in this document can be sent to me at: ahaswell@westminster.gov.uk.

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