



# SLEEP AND LIFESTYLE CHOICES

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Sleep is essential for our physical and emotional wellbeing. However, many lifestyle choices can impact on the quality and quantity of the sleep we receive. In this fact sheet we will explore the effects of some common behaviours and their effects on our sleep.

## Caffeine

Caffeine has been called the most popular drug in the world. It is found naturally in over 60 plants including the coffee bean, tea leaf, kola nut and cacao pod. All over the world people consume caffeine on a daily basis in coffee, tea, cocoa, chocolate, some soft drinks, and some drugs. Because caffeine is a stimulant, most people use it after waking up in the morning or to remain alert during the day. While it is important to note that caffeine cannot replace sleep, it can temporarily make us feel more alert by blocking sleep-inducing chemicals in the brain and increasing adrenaline production.

People experiencing stress tend to consume significant amounts of caffeine to get a boost that gets them going in the morning or helps them make it through the day. However, caffeine can actually increase your stress levels by increasing the production of stress hormones (adrenaline and cortisol) and significantly affect the amount and quality of sleep you get.

Caffeine can have a stimulating effect as soon as 15 minutes after it is consumed. Once in the body, caffeine will persist for several hours: it takes about six hours for one half of the caffeine to be eliminated. So it is recommended to cease drinking coffee in the afternoon or around six hours before you wish to sleep, if you think that caffeine has an impact on your sleep.

## Alcohol

Even a couple of alcoholic drinks can interfere with the normal sleep process. Normal sleep consists of two processes – REM (Rapid Eye Movement) and Non-Rem Sleep. When you drink alcohol close to bedtime, you can go straight into deep sleep, which is the final stage of Non-REM sleep. Therefore you do not enter, or complete your normal sleep cycle.

In the course of a night you usually have six to seven cycles of REM sleep, which leaves you feeling refreshed. However, if you've been drinking alcohol, you'll typically have only one to two, meaning you can wake feeling exhausted as you haven't had a full sleep process period.

When you drink more than usual, you may have to get up in the night to go to the toilet. And it's not just the liquid you've drunk that you'll be getting rid of. Alcohol is a diuretic, which means it encourages the body to lose extra fluid through sweat too, making you dehydrated.

Drinking can also make you snore loudly! It relaxes the muscles in your body, which means the tissue in your throat, mouth and nose can stop air flowing smoothly, and is more likely to vibrate.

If you do continue to drink alcohol close to bedtime, try to give your body time to process the alcohol you've drunk before you try to sleep. On average it takes one hour to process one unit. With a typical drink containing two units, it is likely to take two hours after each drink, to get a fulfilling night's sleep.

Sign up to [www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk) to keep track of what you're drinking over time and set yourself goals for cutting back. It is important to know how many units of alcohol you are consuming. If you drink in the evening you could still be over the limit to drive the next day – remember the risk here! If you are concerned about your drinking behaviour, call your Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) or visit your GP.

## Smoking

Smoking cigarettes or using other tobacco products like cigars, can affect your sleep in several important ways. It all has to do with the active ingredient, nicotine.

First, depending on your level of use and dependence, your desire for additional nicotine during your sleep may cause you to awaken and this may lead to insomnia. Nicotine itself is a stimulant, just like caffeine, and the use of it too close to bedtime may also make it difficult for you to fall asleep.

Smoking is also associated with a disruption of the basic structure of sleep, which is the distribution of REM and Non-REM sleep - the pattern of sleep stages that occur during the night. Research has shown that current smokers take slightly longer to fall asleep (called sleep latency), they sleep less, and have less deep sleep. For those who quit smoking, these differences quickly improve.

If you smoke and have disrupted sleep, this may be yet another reason why you should quit for your health and wellbeing! Call your EAP or see your GP, if you would like help to stop smoking.

## Exercise

We are all aware of the positive effects of regular exercise on our wellbeing. However, there is quite a complex relationship between exercise and sleep. Exercise can help you sleep sounder and longer and feel more awake during the day. But the key is found in the type of exercise you choose and the time you participate in it during the day.

Exercising vigorously right before bed or within about three hours of your bedtime can actually make it harder to fall asleep. It is often thought that a good workout before bed helps you feel more tired. In actuality, vigorous exercise right before bed stimulates your heart, brain and muscles - the opposite of what you want at bedtime. Exercise also raises your body temperature right before bed which will not aid your sleep, as lowering body temperature is a signal to our body to sleep.

Morning exercise can relieve stress and improve mood and these effects can indirectly improve sleep. To get a more direct sleep promoting benefit from morning exercise, however, you can couple it with exposure to outdoor light. Being exposed to natural light in the morning, whether you're exercising or not, can improve your sleep at night by reinforcing your body's sleep-wake cycle.

When it comes to having a direct effect on getting a good night's sleep, it's vigorous exercise in the late afternoon or early evening that appears most beneficial. That's because it raises your body temperature above normal a few hours before bed, allowing it to start falling just as you're getting ready for bed. This decrease in body temperature appears to be a trigger that helps ease you into sleep.

The type of vigorous workout we're talking about is a cardiovascular workout. That means you engage in some activity in which you keep your heart rate up and your muscles pumping continuously for at least 20 minutes. Although strength training, stretching, yoga, and other methods of exercise are beneficial, none match the sleep enhancing benefits of cardiovascular exercise.

Try to schedule at least 20 minutes of vigorous exercise three or four times a week. Choose whatever activity you enjoy. Walk to and from work, or walk the dog. Jog, swim, bike, ski, jump rope, dance or play tennis - just make it part of your routine.

Always check with your GP before you embark upon a new exercise regime.