



Sleep, alcohol and other drugs

Everyone needs sleep. Most people need 6 – 8 hours sleep each night, but the amount of sleep each person needs to feel refreshed and awake the next morning varies. When you’ve been using alcohol and/or other drugs, you may find getting a good night’s sleep a challenge.

Sleep problems can take weeks or even months to overcome, and it takes effort and practice to improve our sleep. Often people are unable to get to sleep or they wake during the night and find it difficult (if not impossible) to get back to sleep or they keep waking in the early hours of the morning, which can be a symptom of depression and anxiety.

Sleep can be affected by:	
• Whether you are comfortable or not	• Depression, anxiety, worry and stress
• Alcohol and other drugs	• Hunger or thirst
• Physical pain and/or illness	• Whether you’ve had any exercise during the day
• Light, sound, and temperature (being too hot or cold)	• Night sweats (a common symptom of alcohol and drug withdrawal)

Another important factor is your own ‘body clock’ – your body’s sense of whether it’s time to be asleep or awake. Alcohol and other drug use can affect your body clock especially if you are going to bed very late (i.e. in the early hours of the morning) and getting up later in the day.

Getting back into a healthy sleep routine takes time and often requires you to make BIG changes to how you organise your day and night. If you want to get your body clock back into a normal rhythm (called your ‘circadian rhythm’), it’s important to get out of bed at the same time every morning (ideally before 9.30am) – even if you haven’t had a great sleep the night before.

Restoring a healthy sleep pattern

Get up at the same time each day and go to bed at the same time each night, not so early that you’re lying awake for ages but not so late that you wake feeling tired

Daily exercise helps: 30 minutes each morning or afternoon is best. Even a walk will help. Exercising at night (apart from sex) can make getting to sleep even harder.

Things you can do to lower your stress levels – apart from using alcohol and other drugs - include using relaxation techniques, herbal teas (chamomile is good), massage, acupuncture, a warm bath, aromatherapy and a drink of warm milk before going to bed.

Keep a sleep diary

Keeping a sleep diary for a couple of weeks can help you see how your body clock works and where changes are needed. If you keep a sleep diary for a few months you can see your progress. You record the times that you go to bed, go to sleep, woke during the night, woke for the day, got out of bed and nap during the day. (Ask your CADS clinician for a sleep log.) It can also be useful to share with your doctor or any other person you see about sleep problems.

Sleeping pills only help short-term sleep problems that have a clear cause rather than long-term sleep problems. They don't work if taken for more than a couple of weeks because your body adjusts to them so when you stop taking them, sleep can be even harder to achieve than when you started taking them.

Alcohol and sleep

Drinking alcohol in the hour before bed can reduce the time it takes to get to sleep BUT after 3-4 hours alcohol usually makes sleep more disturbed especially if you have a full bladder and need to get up to go to the toilet. Getting back to sleep can be difficult.

- Alcohol can cause strange and sometimes disturbing dreams.
- Alcohol can affect your breathing, causing snoring and periods when breathing actually stops. You then wake up feeling tired and 'fuzzy' even though you've had hours of sleep.

Dependent drinking

Alcohol dependency may have damaged your sleeping pattern. Many regular drinkers find it takes them a long time to get to sleep and their sleep is affected for a long time after they stop drinking, like opiate users. Be prepared for a period of poor sleep after stopping regular alcohol use and remember that 'having a nightcap' is a cause of relapse.

Nicotine and caffeine

Both are mild stimulants, increasing heart rate and releasing adrenaline. Unless they are decaffeinated, tea, coffee and cola drinks contain caffeine; so do many 'energy' drinks. Avoid caffeine at night.

Although many smokers say that smoking helps calm them, nicotine has no sedative effect; it only calms you down because it relieves nicotine withdrawal symptoms. Giving up smoking can help with sleep; non-smokers and ex-smokers get on average 20% more sleep than smokers get each night. If you want help to give up smoking speak to your CADS clinician who can support you with nicotine replacement therapy.

Drugs and sleep

Drugs can have a powerful effect on sleep.

Methamphetamine and other stimulants

Seeing strange things, hearing voices, or being paranoid when you're high might be a sign of sleep deprivation. You may be able to avoid this by having just a few hours' sleep; even a simple nap can help your mind become more focused and your thinking become clearer.

With heavy methamphetamine use a person will stay up all night long which disturbs the circadian rhythm in a way that is similar to both jet lag and changing time zones. Melatonin may help. It's a non-addictive natural sleep aid that helps adjust your body clock back into a normal sleep pattern. Your GP can prescribe this for you or talk to your local health food store about other options.

Weird dreams, nightmares, dreams of using – all are normal for people withdrawing from methamphetamine so don't freak out if this happens to you.

Withdrawal from opioids and opiates

Often when all other withdrawal symptoms have faded you still find it hard to get a good night's sleep. This can go on for months. Many people find that one of the worst things about opiate withdrawal is the constant lying awake thinking that all they need to get to sleep is opiates or other drugs like benzos.

Sleeplessness is part and parcel of the withdrawal process, so if you want to stay drug-free, you need to be prepared for some sleepless nights. However, following the info provided on this sheet can help you get into a routine that will give you a good night's sleep.

Ways to improve your sleep:

1. Reset your body clock by getting up at the same time each morning.
2. Avoid sleeping during the daytime.
3. Exercise for at least 30 mins a day.
4. Avoid alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine especially in the evening.
5. Watch TV in the lounge, not in bed.
6. Do something that relaxes you before going to bed: have a bath or do relaxation techniques.
7. If you lay awake for more than 30 mins get up and do something relaxing until you feel sleepy.
8. Avoid worrying about things in bed: write them down, or get up and do something relaxing. If very worrying things are keeping you awake at night, you might find it helpful to talk to someone by phoning Lifeline.
9. Tell your CADS clinician about things that worry you. A problem shared is a problem halved.
10. Make a 'to do' list for the next day before going to bed. This helps reduce worry during the night.
11. Try keeping a sleep diary and use it to help chart your progress.
12. Eat a good dinner, but not right before bed.
13. Make your bedroom peaceful and calming.
14. Darken the bedroom with heavy drapes.
15. Try to be patient. Your sleep will get better but adjusting your body clock and setting a healthy sleeping pattern takes time.



