



The importance of sleep



Lots of people have problems with their sleep¹.

Sleep problems can be horrible; lack of sleep or poor quality sleep can make you feel less well and affect your quality of life.

What is more, sleep really matters to your heart. Even apparently healthy people who are sleep-deprived run a higher than average risk of heart problems. Sleep is good for your immune system, breathing and mental health. So it is worth paying attention to your sleep.




What causes sleep problems?

Sleep problems can be caused by other health problems. Some people find that their heart failure symptoms keep them awake.

You may get breathless if you lie flat, or you may wake up in the middle of the night with such severe breathlessness that you have to sit or stand up to catch your breath. If you have heart failure, you may need to sleep propped up by several pillows.³

Medicines, anxiety and stress can all interfere with sleep, as well. Fortunately, there are strategies and techniques for managing sleep problems. Read on to find out more.



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Talking to your healthcare team

Because sleep quality is closely linked to heart health, you should always discuss any concerns about sleep with your healthcare team. They may give you particular advice about managing your sleep; for example, in heart failure the position you sleep in can be important, because some sleeping positions place particular stress on your system⁴. They may also want to assess you for sleep apnoea.



Whatever you do, **do not drink alcohol to help you sleep**. Even if alcohol helps you to fall asleep, it greatly interferes with sleep quality and you may end up sleeping even less well. Also, alcohol can damage your heart, and is best avoided altogether when you have heart failure.



Self-help techniques

If your healthcare team is happy that you have no underlying medical reasons for your poor sleep, you may wish to try some self-help techniques. Here are some techniques that you may find helpful:

- Long before bed, **avoid stimulants like caffeine and chocolate**. Did you know that a cup of coffee can still be affecting you, 12 hours after you drank it?
- **Establish a going-to-bed routine that lets you wind down slowly before sleep**. Relaxing activities such as reading, meditating or listening to gentle music may be helpful.
- **Keep mobile phones and computers switched off while you sleep**. Not only can audible notifications wake you up, but the light from screens can make you alert just when it's least useful. Switch them off well ahead of sleep.



- **Limit and/or manage stress as much as possible.**



- **During the day, get some exposure to natural light, even if it is just through a window.** This helps you to maintain a healthy sleep-wake cycle.

- **Make sure you have a pleasant, relaxing environment to sleep in.** Temperature, the comfort level of your bed and level of darkness can all make a difference.

- **Try to maintain a regular sleep-wake cycle throughout the week.**

If you find that you are repeatedly getting bad night's sleep, its time for you to start making changes!



Problems with sleep can have a major impact on your quality of life, and can affect your heart health. If you are unhappy about the quality of sleep you are getting — or not getting — do raise this with your healthcare team, because there are ways of managing it.

If you happen to have an urgent medical concern, please call your doctor, go to your local emergency room, or call your local Emergency Contact number. Remember, your doctor is your primary source for information on your condition and treatment. Be sure to speak with them if you have any questions or concerns.

References

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3. Heart failure – Symptoms – NHS Choices. Nhs.uk. <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Heart-failure/Pages/Symptoms.aspx>. 2016 March 24.
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