



Tossing and Turning? Importance of sleep for older adults, by Catherine Findley, LCSW

MYTH: As we get older, we don't need as much sleep.

TRUTH: As we age, getting good quality and quantity of sleep is just as important as when we were younger and perhaps harder to get.

Got Rhythm?

Older folks may have more trouble falling asleep and more trouble staying asleep. Circadian rhythms are what coordinate the timing of our bodily functions -- including sleep. **In general, older people tend to be sleepier in the early evenings and wake earlier**, compared to younger adults. Are you getting stressed out trying to stay in bed and go back to sleep in the early mornings? If it is already daylight, embrace your newfound "early bird" and look at life from a different perspective. Then when you get tired later in the day, take a nap.

Lights Out / Chill Out

If your issue is falling asleep at night, reduce naps in the day (limit yourself to 20 minutes) or, if your schedule allows you to wake later, embrace your "night owl" by stretching your routine to include an extra hour of television, reading, or a hobby with your hands... but then turn out the lights and set your thermostat for a cool temperature (54-75 degrees is optimal) to induce a pleasant sleep environment. You may even want to invest in black out curtains, ear plugs, white noise machines, humidifiers, etc. to help with sleep.

Why is sleep so important when you are an adult and no longer growing?

Research suggests that **improving sleep quality could lower the risk of age-related cognitive decline**. Studies point out that sleep deprivation causes lower learning ability and memory problems which could contribute to dementia down the road. People who don't get enough restorative sleep have brain imaging patterns similar to those with Alzheimer's disease. Chronic insomnia or sleeplessness can lead to increased risks for accidents and illnesses. The National Sleep foundation recommends 7-9 hours of sleep but it can vary from person to person.

How can you get more sleep? Listen to your body, quiet your mind...

1. Stick to the same bedtime schedule, even on weekends. Get sunlight in the morning, then dim the lights in the evening to keep your circadian rhythms in check.
2. Get some exercise during the day such as short walks.
3. Avoid naps during the day **if you have trouble falling asleep**.
4. Sleep on a comfortable mattress and pillows. Most quality mattresses are designed to last 9-10 years.
5. Talk to your doctor to see if any of your routine medications have been known to cause sleep disruptions. Explore options for changing to another medication or dosage.
6. Don't engage in upsetting conversations or thoughts before bedtime. It can wait until tomorrow.
7. Many people experience stress in older age due to losses, physical ailments, changes in relationships, decreasing independence, etc. Seek out counseling to address these life issues.
8. Avoid caffeine, heavy meals, alcohol or smoking for several hours before bedtime.

If you think you have sleep problems due to emotional stress or dealing with family issues, call Robin McMilin, CJFS Clinical Director, at 205.879.3438. A visit with one of our licensed social workers might be the best medicine.