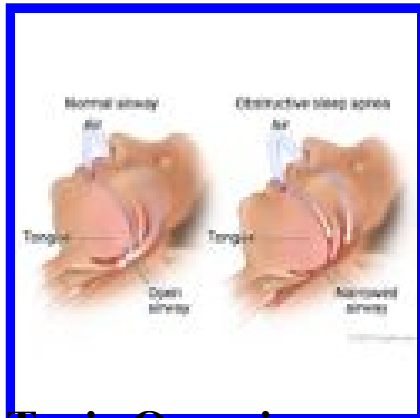




Sleep Problems, Age 12 and Older



Topic Overview

[Obstructive sleep apnea](#)

[Blocked upper airway](#)

Everyone has a "bad night" once in a while. Dogs barking, the wind howling, or overeating may make it hard to sleep. It is estimated that 35% of adults have occasional sleep problems, which can have many causes.

Insomnia

The medical term for trouble falling asleep or staying asleep is insomnia. Insomnia can include:

- Trouble getting to sleep (taking more than 45 minutes to fall asleep).
- Frequent awakenings with inability to fall back to sleep.
- Early morning awakening.
- Feeling very tired after a night of sleep.

But insomnia usually is not a problem unless it makes you feel tired during the day. If you are less sleepy at night or wake up early but still feel rested and alert, there usually is little need to worry. Fortunately, home treatment measures successfully relieve occasional insomnia.

Occasional insomnia may be caused by noise, extreme temperatures, jet lag, changes in your sleep environment, or a change in your sleep pattern, such as shift work. Insomnia may also be caused by temporary or situational life stresses, such as a traumatic event or an impending deadline. Your insomnia is likely to disappear when the cause of your sleep problem goes away.

- Short-term insomnia may last from a few nights to a few weeks and be caused by worry over a [stressful situation](#) or by jet lag.
- Long-term insomnia, which may last months or even years, may be caused by:

- Advancing age. Insomnia occurs more frequently in adults older than age 60.
- Mental health problems, such as [anxiety](#), [depression](#), or [mania](#).
- [Medicines](#). Many prescription and non-prescription medicines can cause sleep problems.
- [Chronic pain](#), which often develops after a major injury or illness, such as shingles or back problems, or after a limb has been amputated (phantom limb pain).
- Other problems that interrupt your sleep, such as [asthma](#), [coronary artery disease](#), [chronic obstructive pulmonary disease \(COPD\)](#), or menopause.
- Alcohol and illegal drug use or withdrawal.
- Cigarettes and other tobacco use.
- Drinking or eating foods that contain caffeine, such as coffee, tea, chocolate, or soft drinks (for example, Coke, Pepsi, or Mountain Dew).

Sleep apnea

Sleep apnea is one of several sleep disorders. Sleep apnea refers to repeated episodes of not breathing during sleep for at least 10 seconds (apneic episodes). It usually is caused by a blockage in the nose, mouth, or throat (upper airways (Figure 1)). When airflow through the nose and mouth is blocked, breathing may stop for 10 seconds or longer. People who have sleep apnea usually snore loudly and are very tired during the day. It can affect children and adults.

Narcolepsy

Narcolepsy is a sleep disorder that has distinct symptoms, including:

- Sudden sleep attacks, which may occur during any type of activity at any time of day. You may fall asleep while engaged in an activity such as eating dinner, driving the car, or carrying on a conversation. These sleep attacks can occur several times a day and may last from a few minutes to several hours.
- Sudden, brief periods of muscle weakness while you are awake (cataplexy). This weakness may affect specific muscle groups or may affect the entire body. Cataplexy is often brought on by strong emotional reactions, such as laughing or crying.
- Hallucinations just before a sleep attack.
- Brief loss of the ability to move when you are falling asleep or just waking up (sleep paralysis).

Parasomnias

Parasomnias are undesirable physical activities that occur during sleep involving skeletal muscle activity, [nervous system](#) changes, or both. Night terrors and sleepwalking are two types of parasomnias. Sleep can be hard for people who experience parasomnias. While "asleep," a person with parasomnia may walk, scream, rearrange furniture, eat odd foods, or pick up a weapon.

Parasomnia can cause odd, distressing, and sometimes dangerous nighttime activities. These disorders have medically explainable causes and usually are treatable.

Restless legs syndrome

Restless legs syndrome (RLS) is a condition that produces an intense feeling of discomfort, aching, or twitching deep inside the legs. Jerking movements may affect the toes, ankles, knees, and hips. Moving the legs or walking around usually relieves the discomfort for a short time.

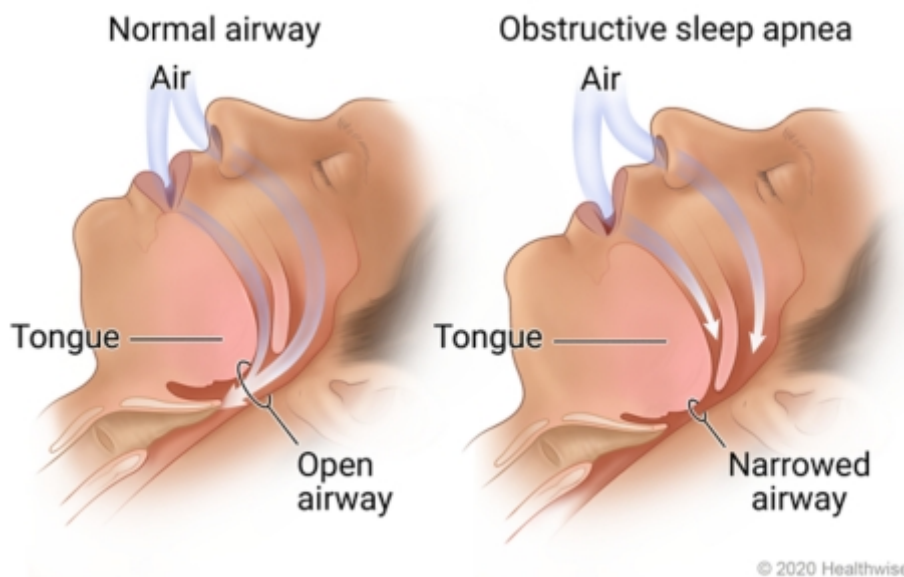
The exact cause of restless legs syndrome is not known. The symptoms of restless legs syndrome most often occur while a person is asleep or is trying to fall asleep. The twitching or jerking leg movements may wake the person up, causing insomnia, unrestful sleep, and daytime sleepiness.

When a sleep problem or lack of time keeps you from getting a good night's sleep, excessive daytime sleepiness may occur. While almost everyone experiences daytime sleepiness from time to time, it can have serious consequences such as motor vehicle accidents, poor work or school performance, and work-related accidents.

Sleep problems may be a symptom of a medical or mental health problem. It is important to consider whether a medical or mental health problem is causing you to sleep poorly. Treating a long-term sleep problem without looking for the cause may hide the real reason for your poor sleep.

[Check your symptoms](#) to decide if and when you should see a doctor.

Figure 1 - Obstructive sleep apnea: Blocked upper airway



Blocked or narrowed airways in your nose, mouth, or throat can cause sleep apnea. Your airway can become narrowed when your throat muscles and tongue relax during sleep.

Health Tools

Health Tools help you make wise health decisions or take action to improve your health.

Actionsets are designed to help people take an active role in managing a health condition.

- [Sleep Problems: Dealing With Jet Lag](#)
- [Sleep: Helping Your Children—and Yourself—Sleep Well](#)

Check Your Symptoms

Home Treatment

How much sleep a person needs varies from person to person. The number of hours you sleep is not as important as how you feel when you wake up. If you do not feel refreshed, you probably need more sleep.

Feeling tired during the daytime is another sign you are not getting enough sleep. Talk to a doctor if you are sleepy during the day and it gets in the way of the normal things you do. It's especially important that you do not drive or use machinery while you are drowsy.

The average total nightly sleep time is 7½ to 8 hours. Healthy adults can require anywhere from 4 to 10 hours of sleep. Many times, simple home treatment can help you get the sleep you need.

If your sleep problem does not require a visit to your doctor, establish a routine to promote good sleep habits:

- Set a bedtime and time to get up, and stick to them, even on weekends. This will help your body get used to a regular sleep time.
- Wind down toward the end of the day. Don't take on problem-solving conversations or challenging activities in the evening.
- Take a warm bath before bed.
- Keep your bedroom dark, cool, and quiet.
- Remove distractions, such as a clock, telephone, or radio, from your bedroom.
- Use a humidifier or "white noise" machine to block out background noise in your bedroom throughout the night.
- Try using a sleep mask and earplugs at night.
- If you take medicine that may be stimulating, such as antihistamines, decongestants, or asthma medicines, take them as long before bedtime as possible.
- Reserve the bedroom for sleeping and sexual activities so that you come to associate it with sleep. Go to another room to read, watch television, or eat.
- After getting into bed, make a conscious effort to let your muscles relax. Imagine yourself in a peaceful, pleasant scene. For more information, see the topic [Stress Management](#).

When you can't get to sleep, try the following:

- If you are still awake after 15 or 20 minutes, get up and read in dim light or do a boring task until you feel drowsy. Don't lie in bed and think about how much sleep you're missing or watch TV.

Avoid activities that might keep you from a good night's sleep:

- Do not take naps during the day, especially in the evening.
- Do not drink or eat caffeine after 3:00 p.m. This includes coffee, tea, cola drinks, and chocolate.
- Do not smoke or use other tobacco products. Nicotine can disrupt sleep and reduce total sleep time. Smokers report more daytime sleepiness and minor accidents than do non-smokers, especially in younger age groups. For more information, see the topic [Quitting Smoking](#).
- Avoid drinking alcohol. It may make you sleepy but also will probably wake you up after a short time.

Try a non-prescription medicine, such as Nytol or Sleep-Eze. Use non-prescription medicines wisely since they can cause daytime confusion, memory loss, and dizziness. Continued use of sleeping pills may actually increase your sleeplessness (rebound insomnia). If you take any prescription medicines, talk with your doctor before trying any non-prescription sleep medicines.

Melatonin is a popular herbal remedy for sleep problems. Experts disagree about its usefulness for sleep problems. Before using any treatment, it is important to consider the risks and benefits of the treatment. For more information, see the topic [Melatonin](#).

If you have several nights of trouble sleeping, review all of your prescription and non-prescription medicines with your doctor or pharmacist to determine whether the medicines you take could be the cause of your sleep problem.

You may have after travelling ([jet lag](#)), especially if you change time zones.

Symptoms to watch for during home treatment

Be sure to talk to your doctor if your sleep problems get worse, you feel very tired, or have a hard time functioning during the day. Also, let your doctor know if your symptoms become more severe or happen more often.

Prevention

Many sleep problems can be prevented. Avoid activities that might keep you from a good night's sleep.

- Use your bed only for sleeping. Do not read, watch television, or do paperwork in bed. Reserve the bedroom for sleeping and sexual activities so that you come to connect it with sleep.
- Do not take naps during the day, especially in the evening.
- Do not drink or eat caffeine after 3:00 p.m. This includes coffee, tea, cola drinks, and chocolate.
- Avoid eating large meals close to bedtime.
- Exercise during the day. Avoid strenuous exercise within 2 hours of bedtime.
- Do not smoke or use other tobacco products. Nicotine can disrupt sleep and reduce total sleep time. Smokers report more daytime sleepiness and minor accidents than do non-smokers, especially in younger age groups. For more information, see the topic [Quitting Smoking](#).

- Avoid drinking alcohol. It may make you sleepy but also will probably wake you up after a short time.
- Do not engage in stimulating activities at bedtime. Substitute reading or listening to relaxing music for watching television.

You may be able to prevent [sleep problems](#) caused by jet lag by staying hydrated with water and avoiding caffeine, such as coffee.

Children also need plenty of sleep to grow and develop. It's important to help your child and yourself to [sleep well](#) with a good bedtime routine.

Preparing For Your Appointment

To prepare for your appointment, see the topic [Making the Most of Your Appointment](#).

You can help your doctor diagnose and treat your condition by being prepared to answer the following questions:

- How long have you been troubled with a sleep problem?
 - What is your major symptom?
 - Does your sleep problem come and go or does it occur every night?
- What is your normal sleep pattern?
- What was happening in your life when the sleep problem started?
- Have you had a sleep problem in the past? If so, how was it treated?
- Do you have any other symptoms that may be related to your sleep problems?
Symptoms may include:
 - Rapid or irregular heartbeat.
 - Nausea or vomiting.
 - Numbness or weakness.
 - Excessive sweating.
 - Feeling like you are not able to get enough air (air hunger).
 - Restlessness, irritability, or feeling on edge.
 - Feelings of overwhelming anxiety or fear.
- What makes your symptoms better or worse?
- Have you ever taken prescription or non-prescription medicine to help you sleep?
- What other prescription or non-prescription medicines do you take?
- Are you using alcohol or cannabis (marijuana), or illegal drugs such as cocaine, to help you sleep?
- What home treatment have you tried? Did it help?
- Does your bed partner report that you snore or are restless in your sleep?
- Do you frequently fall asleep during the day, such as at work or while driving?
- Is your sleep problem interfering with your usual activities?
- Has anyone else in your family ever been diagnosed with any form of depression or sleep disorder?
- Do you have any [health risks](#)?

Before visiting your doctor, keep a [sleep diary](#) of your sleep patterns for at least 2 weeks.

Related Information

- [Abdominal Pain, Age 12 and Older](#)
- [Chest Problems](#)
- [Respiratory Problems, Age 12 and Older](#)

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