**Sleep Myths: Fact or Fiction?**

If you want to get more sleep, then it’s time to separate the fact from the fiction and bust some of the more common sleep myths.

The reality is we are often the biggest culprits of our own sleep deprivation. We find it hard to break bad habits and buy into sleep myths that hinder good sleep. So now it’s time to find out which sleep myths may be preventing you from getting a better night’s sleep.

## We need eight hours

There is no ‘magic number’ for sleep. Everyone’s requirements are different (some of us cope far better on less than others). Gauge what you need by how you feel the next day but regularly getting less than six hours a night is not ideal. [Research](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-2157461/Less-6-hours-sleep-significantly-increases-risk-stroke-fit-healthy.html#axzz2KJ17xLl7)has found that those who frequently get fewer than six hours a night are at significantly increased risk of stroke and heart disease, with evidence that not sleeping enough may ramp up the ‘fight or flight’ response to stress, releasing hormones that speed up heart rate and raise blood pressure.

## Once a poor sleeper, always a poor sleeper

It is always possible to achieve better sleep. Start by looking at your [bedroom environment](https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-advice/perfect-sleep-environment/)– is it cool, quiet and dark? Improve ‘sleep hygiene’ by keeping electrical devices like TVs and laptops out of the bedroom. Give yourself time to [wind down](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CW2ZejN3OFg)properly before bed and make sure that the bed you’re sleeping on is comfortable, supportive and less than [seven](https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-advice/7-steps-to-a-better-nights-sleep/)to eight years old. Lifestyle, exercise and diet also play a part in getting a good night’s sleep.

## Daytime naps are bad for you

Napping is not generally encouraged as it does have an effect on night time sleep. However if you haven’t slept well, a planned daytime nap can improve alertness without necessarily affecting nocturnal sleep – in fact they can give you as much energy as two cups of strong coffee, but the effects are longer lasting. Twenty minutes is sufficient to turn off the nervous system and recharge the whole body – more than 30 minutes, though, is long enough to put you in a deep sleep and leave you feeling groggy when you wake.  Naps caused by sleepiness from [insomnia](https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-hub/sleep-disorders/insomnia/) may impair night time sleep and always remember that they are not a permanent solution to sleep deprivation.

## If you can’t fall asleep at night, sleep more at weekends

Bingeing on Zzs over the weekend and not sleeping during the week – what Harvard sleep expert Robert Stickgold, PhD, calls [‘sleep bulimia’](http://harvardmagazine.com/2005/07/deep-into-sleep.html)– upsets your [circadian rhythms](https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-hub/sleep-matters/circadian-rhythms/) and makes it even harder to get refreshing sleep. To achieve good quality sleep, regularity of bedtimes is key. Going to bed and getting up at roughly the same time, all the time, will programme your body to sleep better.

## Alcohol makes me sleep better

While drinking alcohol may make you tired and cuts the time it takes to first nod off (and of course drinking a lot will really knock you out), in reality it only leads to fragmented sleep, robs us of one of our most satisfying types of sleep (where dreams occur) and wakes up during the night.  Leave an hour and a half to two hours before going to bed so the alcohol is already wearing off.

## Older people don’t need as much sleep

It is a common misconception that sleep needs decline with age. It’s not about needing less sleep, but unfortunately as we get older [sleep quality](https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-hub/sleep-matters/sleep-quality/) declines and we experience a change in [sleeping patterns](https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-hub/sleep-matters/sleep-patterns/) – whether that’s more frequent wakings in the night, loss of non-REM sleep or more daytime napping.

There are all sorts of ways in which older people can help themselves to a better night’s sleep – all of them are really based on good old-fashioned common sense such as taking a look at the bedroom environment. Mostly it’s just a case of adjusting daily routines as sleeping patterns change – and trying to limit the cat naps!

## Eating cheese gives you nightmares

There’s no solid evidence to suggest that cheese causes nightmares. In fact, cheese is actually a good bedtime snack especially when it’s combined with oak crackers. Calcium, found in cheese, is a natural sleep aid as it contains tryptophan, an amino acid the body uses to produce [melatonin](https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-hub/sleep-matters/melatonin/) (the sleep inducing hormone.)

## Waking up a sleepwalker is bad

It is a myth that waking up a [sleepwalker](https://sleepcouncil.org.uk/advice-support/sleep-hub/sleep-disorders/sleepwalking/) can cause a heart attack, shock or kill them! However it can be difficult to wake a sleepwalker and it has been known that some do attack those trying to wake them. It is a concern to leave a sleepwalker wandering around so it’s important to gently return them to their bed. If that doesn’t work, make loud noises from a distance to try wake them.

## Yawning is a sign you’re tired

Not always. There can be several reasons why we yawn besides being tired. Sometimes we yawn on awakening or during the day if we’re bored or even if someone else does!

## Counting sheep helps you fall asleep

Technically it can, but so can counting dogs or cows! It’s the repetitive nature of the task that actually makes you feel sleepy or fall asleep. If you’re counting sheep, you’re less likely to be thinking any other thoughts that are worrying you or playing on your mind. Absorption in a mental task is an aspect of mindfulness and can help to relax you.

