

Bed head



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Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast.

(William Shakespeare, Macbeth)

There's nothing like a good night's sleep to make you feel tip-top. We 'sleep on it' when there's a tough issue to resolve, or remind ourselves that 'things will look better in the morning' when we're stressed. That's because sleep is like the body's own mechanic: it allows it to mentally and physically restore itself.

ON STAGE

Sleep involves five stages, lasting a total of 90 - 110 minutes and repeating throughout the night (Table).

REM SLEEP

REM sleep accounts for two hours of sleep in an eight-hour cycle. This is when you dream epic dreams with weird plots, whereas during stage 4 sleep you have repetitive, simplistic dreams that aren't often remembered. Sometimes, terrifyingly, people wake up during REM sleep but the body is still paralysed – people once thought that this was a sign of a demon or witch sitting on your chest, and called it 'old hag syndrome'.



THE STAGES OF SLEEP

Sleep stages	When	Characteristics
Light sleep (stage 1)	First few minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drowsiness • Occasional twitching • Easily awakened • Muscle activity and eye movements slow
True sleep (stage 2)	Within 10 - 15 minutes of light sleep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heart rate and breathing slows, becoming more regular • Body temperature decreases • Slow brain waves, with brief spikes
Entering deep sleep (stage 3)	From 15 minutes after falling asleep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slowest heart rate and breathing • Brain produces delta waves (large and slow), with occasional quicker, shorter spikes
Deep sleep (stage 4)	Up to 70 minutes after falling asleep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rhythmic breathing • Slowest muscle activity • Eye movements stop • Delta brain waves • Bedwetting, night terrors and sleepwalking can occur in those prone to them
Rapid eye movement (REM) sleep	70 - 90 minutes after falling asleep	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active brain • Rapid, shallow and irregular breathing • Paralysed limbs • Increased heart rate • Jerky and/or active eyes

SLEEP, ELUSIVE SLEEP

What if sleep eludes you? Anyone who's suffered from insomnia knows how slowly those dreadful minutes tick by while you lie awake. An estimated 30 - 50% of people suffer from insomnia, 10% chronically. Identifying the cause is the first step in resolving insomnia. Stress is the most common cause of short-term/acute insomnia, and if this isn't addressed, it can become chronic.

Sleep easy

- Firstly, it's important to follow good sleep hygiene.
- Go to bed at regular times and follow a routine.
- Don't nap during the day, although a short 20-minute 'power nap' (set the alarm) should be fine if you're very tired.
- Keep your room at a comfortable temperature.

- Don't use your bedroom for work, watching TV, etc.
- Use earplugs to block out noise.
- Don't go to bed hungry – but don't overeat either. A light snack such as a banana or small bowl of oats can help. Oats are especially helpful as they contain B vitamins, needed for nervous system health.
- Avoid caffeine from late afternoon. If you smoke, don't do so in the evening – of course, quitting is best.
- Alcohol may help you nod off, but sleep is light and unrefreshing, and you'll probably wake early.
- Keep your bedroom dark or wear an eye mask.
- Don't watch TV before bedtime – it makes it hard for the brain to achieve delta waves.

If you tend to wake in the wee hours and not get back to sleep in 15 - 20 minutes, get up and do something relaxing like reading or having a warm bath – not working or house cleaning.

Exercise, particularly yoga, is essential for good sleep – just don't exercise less than four hours before bedtime. Relaxation and breathing exercises are helpful, and writing down your worries can stop them from keeping you awake.

Melatonin, a hormone needed for sleep, is produced at night – prompted by darkness – and is affected by how much natural light you get (exposure to light regulates melatonin production). This is why a darkened bedroom, and exposure to natural light during the day, is so important. Melatonin supplements can be purchased in health shops, but shouldn't be taken by children or if you are pregnant.

WITH COMPLEMENTS

Herbal medicine is outstanding for insomnia. For a gentle, effective herb that's easy to find in supermarkets and health shops, you can't go wrong with chamomile. Have a cup in the late afternoon, and another half an hour before bed.

Valerian and passionflower are both effective for insomnia and anxiety, with valerian being particularly helpful for nervous tension and mild depression, and passionflower combating irritability. They won't dope you – instead they relieve stress and promote quality sleep. Dosage varies according to the form – tablets/capsules, tea or drops – but start taking them from lunchtime onwards to gradually reduce tension so that by the time bedtime rolls around, you're all set to snooze.

There's also a host of helpful homeopathic remedies. Use Coffea when a whirling mind keeps you awake, or Aconitum for acute insomnia caused by fear, shock or anxiety, especially if you have nightmares. Chamomilla helps irritable, restless insomniacs. Usually the dosage is 1 pillule three times daily, but they can be taken hourly in acute cases.

Add essential oils to your sleep shopping list – especially lavender. Several research studies confirm lavender's efficacy in reducing insomnia. Place a few drops on your pillow, add 5 drops to a warm bath, or massage a drop onto each temple. Neroli, sandalwood and marjoram essential oils are also effective. Add 3 drops of one of these essential oils to a teaspoon of sweet almond oil and massage into your neck, shoulders and feet to relax muscles and calm your mind.

What you do throughout the day affects sleep, so replacing coffee or black tea with rooibos, drinking chamomile tea if you're feeling stressed (instead of noshing on chocolate), and eating healthily go a long way towards improving sleep quality. If your insomnia is severe or long-lasting, consult an experienced, qualified practitioner, such as a phytotherapist or aromatherapist.

DREAM WEAVER

It's impossible to explain all dreams, as each person has different interpretations of what objects and situations symbolise, but these are the top ten:

- **Teeth or hair falling out.** There are many theories about this, including anxiety about looks, or fear of being unheard or powerless.
- **Needing to go to the loo and not finding one, or it's dirty,** can mean that your bladder's full and your brain is trying to wake you up, or that you feel the need to let go of a bad situation or feeling in life.
- **Falling.** Is either a sign of unresolved fears, especially failure, or a normal part of stage 1 sleep, where muscles twitch while you are nodding off (myoclonic jerk).
- **Being naked.** Feeling defenceless or vulnerable.
- **Being chased or attacked** can mean that you feel things or situations are 'hounding' you. In a crime-ridden society this could represent fears that you may indeed be chased or attacked.
- **Flying.** If you're soaring, you're feeling successful, but struggling to stay aloft means fears of failure, or struggles to achieve goals.
- **Out-of-control car.** Feeling your life is chaotic. If someone else is driving, you're feeling powerless.

COMMON CAUSES OF INSOMNIA

- Poor sleep hygiene
- Noise
- Light
- Room temperature extremes
- Stress
- Illness
- Medication side effects
- Drugs or alcohol
- Restless legs syndrome
- Insufficient exercise
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Sleep apnoea
- Disruptive sleep partner
- Smoking
- Caffeine
- Jet lag

- **Missed the boat** (or other transport). Exactly that – you feel you've missed out on something.
- **You didn't study or are late for exams.** You're afraid you're unprepared for something coming up.
- **Death** usually reflects the end of a situation or relationship in your life, or that some part of yourself has changed.

SLEEP SPECIFICS

- Giraffes need around 2 hours sleep daily, cats 12 - 18, dogs 10.6 and pythons 18.
- New parents get 400 - 750 hours less sleep in the first year of baby's life.

- A 1998 study showed that shining a bright light on the back of someone's knees resets the sleep-wake clock – scientists still can't explain this.
- Sleep deprivation is thought to have played a role in many disasters, including Chernobyl, Three Mile Island and the Exxon Valdez oil spill.
- Before electric light, adults slept for around 10 hours a night, according to Victorian diaries.
- A dream lasts for a few seconds up to 45 minutes – the majority are around 15 minutes long.

SCREAM DREAM

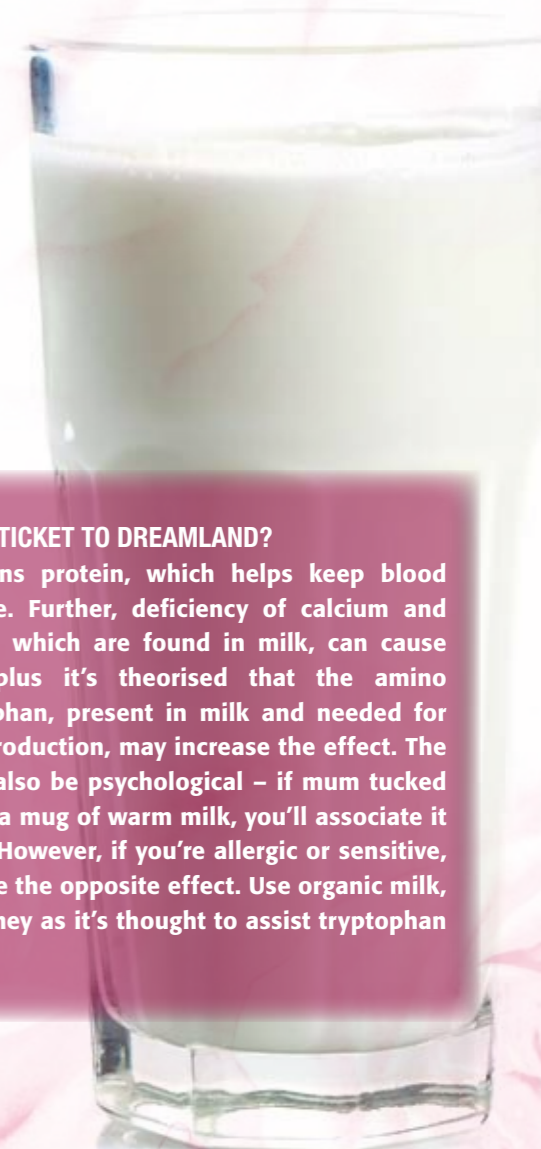
Anyone who's seen someone having a night terror won't soon forget it. Occurring mainly in children, and around 3% of adults, night terrors are characterised by seemingly unfounded panic and terror. Often there's just a feeling of dread, but no dream or nightmare – sufferers are usually found bolt upright in bed, wide-eyed, looking terrified, although they're not awake. They may scream, shout, thrash around, or even sleepwalk. Sweating, palpitations and rapid breathing are also present. Don't awaken them, as they'll be confused (or may fight you) – just ensure that they can't hurt themselves or others.

Triggers include excessive stress, low blood sugar, some medications, fever, overtiredness and poor diet. There's also a strong genetic link. Treatment is the same as for other sleep problems, and keeping blood sugar stable being essential. The tissue salt Kali phos is indicated for night terrors and insomnia – take it hourly from late afternoon until bedtime.

true or false:

Waking sleepwalkers could kill them

False. Sleepwalkers could hurt themselves, so don't leave them to wander – instead, guide them gently back to bed.



MILK: YOUR TICKET TO DREAMLAND?

Milk contains protein, which helps keep blood sugar stable. Further, deficiency of calcium and magnesium, which are found in milk, can cause insomnia, plus it's theorised that the amino acid tryptophan, present in milk and needed for serotonin production, may increase the effect. The effect may also be psychological – if mum tucked you in with a mug of warm milk, you'll associate it with sleep. However, if you're allergic or sensitive, it could have the opposite effect. Use organic milk, and add honey as it's thought to assist tryptophan absorption.

