Along with the physical changes that occur as we get older, changes to sleep patterns are a part of the normal aging process. This doesn't mean that poor sleep is a normal part of aging. Older adults continue to need about the same amount of sleep as younger adults – 7 to 9 hours each night. Learning about the changes and ways to deal with them is helpful.

Changes in Sleep Patterns
There are two kinds of sleep – REM (rapid eye movement) sleep and non-REM sleep. We dream mostly during REM sleep and have the deepest, most refreshing sleep during non-REM sleep.

As people age, they spend less time in deep sleep, which may be why older people are often light sleepers. This can lead to a more fragmented sleep and feeling less rested.

Older adults often feel sleepier and go to bed earlier in the evening and get up earlier in the morning.

These night time sleep changes may lead to napping during the day. Seniors and small children are the only 2 groups for whom it is OK to take daytime naps.

Other Factors
Life events that change routines and involve stress or grief often affect sleep. These include:
- Retirement
- The death of a loved one
- Moving from a family home

Aging may result in other changes that impact sleep:
- Being ill or in pain
- Taking certain medications
- Having physical limitations

These can lead to spending less time outdoors and being less active, which also affect sleep.

Impact of Poor Sleep
Poor sleep affects both physical and emotional health and wellbeing. It can lead to:
- Difficulty staying awake during the day, like when in church or driving a car.
- Being irritable.
- Having memory difficulties or trouble solving problems.
- Feeling depressed.
- Having more falls or accidents.

Improving your Sleep
There are ways to improve your sleep. Certain substances and habits can impede a good night's sleep. Things to avoid include:
- Caffeine in the late afternoon and evening hours.
- Nicotine within an hour of bedtime or if you awaken during the night.
- Alcohol near bedtime.
- Large meals and drinking a lot of fluids in the evening.
- Naps - if you do take one, limit it to 15-20 minutes and don't take it after 3pm.
Ways to help going to and staying asleep:

- Set a relaxing routine for going to sleep – take a warm but not hot bath or listen to soothing music.
- Try eating a light snack with dairy products (milk, cheese), carbohydrates (crackers, cereal), or protein (turkey) 30-60 minutes before bedtime. A small bowl of cereal or a small turkey or cheese sandwich is a good choice.
- Keep your bedroom as quiet and dark as possible. A fan or other type of "white noise" may help. A cool room temperature is also helpful.
- Do not have a TV, radio or other electronic devices on while trying to sleep. The light from a television will cause you to have less restful sleep, and noise from a TV or radio will cause brief awakenings that you won't recall the next day but will make you sleepy.
- Try relaxing your body by starting at your toes and slowly moving up your body. You can also try counting backward from 100 or thinking of things you find calming.

Safe Sleep

It is also important to be safe while sleeping or when getting up.

- Keep a telephone with emergency phone numbers by your bed.
- Have a lamp within reach that you can turn on easily.
- Put a glass of water next to the bed in case you wake up thirsty.
- Use a nightlight in the bathroom.
- Remove area rugs so you won’t trip if you get out of bed in the middle of the night.
- Never smoke in bed.
- Don’t use a heating pad in bed.

Talk to Your Doctor

If you feel tired and are not able to do your normal activities or are having problems sleeping for more than a few weeks, see your doctor. Your doctor will do an exam, talk with you about your symptoms, review your medications and may order testing. Treatment for a sleep disorder or another health condition may be needed.

Sleep problems do not have to be part of your golden years.

Resources

To learn more:

American Academy of Sleep Medicine
2510 North Frontage Road
Darien, IL 60561
1-630-737-9700
www.aasmnet.org

National Institute on Aging Information Center
PO Box 8057
Gaithersburg, MD 20898
800-222-2225
www.nia.nih.gov