

# Sleep

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Many people with HIV have problems sleeping. This can be due to being uncomfortable, illness, worry, anxiety, depression, treatment side-effects, and drug or alcohol use. Not getting enough sleep can cause health problems, but there are a number of practical things you can do to sleep better and in some cases medicines may help.

## Purpose of sleep

Sleep is essential to both physical and mental health. Sleep allows the body and mind to rest and recover. Long-term sleep deprivation can cause emotional problems such as depression. It is thought that long-term sleep problems can mean that the immune system doesn't work properly, meaning that a person may be more likely to get ill.

## Structure of sleep

Sleep follows a pattern, alternating between REM (rapid-eye-movement) sleep and non-REM sleep. In the course of a night, the body goes through cycles of REM and non-REM sleep, and a balance between these patterns is important to get a restful night's sleep.

## How much sleep is needed

People's sleep needs vary, but eight hours is the average sleep requirement for an adult. However, some people feel refreshed on an average of six hours, and other people need an average of nine or ten hours. If you have been working or exercising very hard, are ill, or recovering from an illness or infection, you may find that the amount of sleep you need increases substantially.

## Insomnia

Not being able to sleep is called insomnia. It can take many forms. Some people find it difficult to fall asleep; others wake up after just a few hours of sleep and then can't get back to sleep; some people wake up very early in the morning; and other find that their sleep does not leave them feeling refreshed.

## Causes of insomnia

For many people, worry or stress is the cause of their sleeplessness. Once a problem has resolved, then sleep patterns become better. However, more serious problems like anxiety and depression can cause sleep problems which last for very long periods. Symptoms of illnesses, such as night sweats, and pain can also interfere with sleep. It's a good idea to report these problems to your doctor.

Although some people find that an alcoholic drink helps them to fall to sleep, heavy drinking can cause sleeplessness, as can drinking coffee or tea close to bedtime. Illegal drug use, especially stimulant drugs like amphetamine (speed), methamphetamine, ecstasy and cocaine also cause sleep problems.

Some drugs used to treat HIV, and illnesses associated with it, cause insomnia or other sleep problems. In particular, vivid dreams and insomnia are amongst the most common side-effects of efavirenz (*Sustiva*, also in the combination pill *Atripla*).

Practical factors such as your bed or pillows being uncomfortable, or the room you sleep in being too stuffy, warm, or cold could disrupt your sleep. Ideally, the room you sleep in should be cool and well-ventilated.

## Managing sleep problems

In many cases a few lifestyle changes are enough to bring back good sleep. These might include avoiding tea and coffee and other stimulants for several hours before going to bed, or not napping during the day.

Having a regular bedtime may also help, as might not going to bed until you feel ready to sleep. If you cannot get to sleep after about 30 minutes, get up rather than tossing and turning and getting frustrated, which often makes the problem worse.

Do not be frightened to mention sleep problems to your doctor. If there is an underlying medical cause, such as depression, physical illness, or treatment side-effects, it is important that your doctor knows as soon as possible so appropriate action can be taken or treatment offered.

Medication, often called 'sleeping tablets', are available to help sleep. These can be used to help restore normal sleeping patterns. However, sleeping tablets often only help people fall asleep, but don't keep people asleep, and can make people feel drowsy the next day. The use of some sleep medication over the long-term can cause dependency, although newer medications are becoming available which may not have these problems.