



Sleep and Epilepsy

Sleep is a necessary part of life. It is essential for mental and physical health, quality of life, and safety. You could pursue a healthy lifestyle by eating a [healthy diet](#), [exercising regularly](#), and [finding strategies to reduce stress](#). But, without good quality sleep, your health is at risk.

While most people know the value of sleep and its importance to overall health and well-being, many don't make sleep a priority or the sleep they get isn't quality sleep. The key to good health is knowing how sleep affects people, how much sleep you need, and ways to get better sleep.

How Does Sleep Affect My Seizures?

[Sleep and epilepsy](#) are closely connected. Sleep can affect the frequency, occurrence, timing, and length of seizures.

- Sleep deprivation is a [common trigger of seizures](#) for many people.
- [Some epilepsy syndromes](#) are highly related to sleep and may be called [sleep-related epilepsies](#). For example, individuals living with [benign rolandic epilepsy](#) and [autosomal dominant nocturnal frontal lobe epilepsy](#) have seizures most often at night. Others, such as epilepsy with [generalized tonic clonic seizures](#) alone, happen within 1-2 hours of awakening.
- Epilepsy can worsen your ability to sleep and can also make existing sleep disorders worse.
- [Some of the drugs used to treat epilepsy](#) may also affect sleep. Some seizure medicines may make people more sleepy. Others may lead to problems falling or staying asleep.

Steps you take to improve your sleep can lessen the frequency of seizures as well as improve your overall well-being. People with problems sleeping should talk to their epilepsy providers as well as their primary care providers to sort out possible causes of sleep difficulties.

Caregivers and Sleep

If you are the parent of a child with epilepsy, or a family member helping an adult with epilepsy, it is very important that you make healthy sleep a priority for yourself as well. [Parents](#) of children with epilepsy generally do not get enough sleep. [A study at West Virginia University](#) looked at the sleep habits of 50 parents of children under the age of 5 with epilepsy. These parents slept only 4 hours at night on average. They also woke up an average of 3 times per night to check on their children. The study also found a relation between these nighttime awakenings and decreased happiness in marriage and health of the mother.

If your child lives with epilepsy, pay careful attention to your own sleep habits. If you or your spouse are having trouble sleeping, talk to a health care provider about ways to address the problem.

Short- and Long-Term Effects of Poor Sleep

Practicing good sleep habits is important for both physical and mental health. It also can improve productivity and quality of life overall. Not getting enough sleep in the short term can lead to being too sleepy in the daytime. This can cause many problems, including:*

- car accidents
- anxiety
- attention problems
- short tempers
- home and workplace injuries
- overeating



The effects of long-term sleep deprivation can lead to:*

- high blood pressure
- heart attacks
- stroke
- obesity
- depression
- other mood disorders

*Some of these may be related to medication side effects or other health problems and life challenges related to epilepsy and seizures. Always check with your health care provider if any of these problems happen.

How Much is Enough Sleep?

Sleep needs are different for each person and can change as the person ages. The key is to have the right amount of sleep. More sleep is not always a good thing. According to the [National Sleep Foundation](#), the sleep recommendations for each age group are as follows:

Newborns (0-3 Months): 14 to 17 Hours

May Be Appropriate: 11 to 13 hours/18 to 19 hours

Not Recommended: Less than 11 hours/ More than 19 hours

Infants (4-11 Months): 12 to 15 Hours

May Be Appropriate: 10 to 11 hours/16 to 18 hours

Not Recommended: Less than 10 hours/More than 18 hours

Toddlers (1-2 Years): 11 to 14 Hours

May Be Appropriate: 9 to 10 hours/15 to 16 hours

Not Recommended: Less than 9 hours/More than 16 hours

Preschoolers (3-5 Years): 10 to 13 Hours

May Be Appropriate: 8 to 9 hours/14 hours

Not Recommended: Less than 8 hours/More than 14 hours

School-Aged Children (6-13 Years): 9 to 10 Hours

May Be Appropriate: 7 to 8 hours/12 hours

Not Recommended: Less than 7 hours/More than 12 hours

Teenagers (14 to 17 Years): 8 to 10 Hours

May Be Appropriate: 7 hours/11 hours

Not Recommended: Less than 7 hours/More than 11 hours

Young Adults (18-25): 7 to 9 Hours

May Be Appropriate: 6 hours/10 to 11 hours

Not Recommended: Less than 6 hours/More than 10 hours

Adults (26-64): 7 to 9 Hours

May Be Appropriate: 6 hours/10 hours

Not Recommended: Less than 6 hours/More than 10 hours

Older Adults (≥ 65 years): 7 to 8 Hours

May Be Appropriate: 6 hours/10 hours

Not Recommended: Less than 5 hours/More than 9 hours

How to Get a Good Night's Sleep

No matter how much sleep you need, there are several steps you can take to improve your sleep hygiene. Here are some tips to get a good night's sleep.

- **Set up a realistic time for bed and stick to that schedule.** Going to bed around the same time each night, even on weekends, will help train your brain to associate a specific time of the night to going to bed. This fits with the next section on routine.
- **Shut down and relax.** Stress can cause insomnia. To prevent this, follow a relaxing routine at the end of the day. This helps ease the transition from the activities of the day to the calm relaxation of sleep. Consider some techniques such as [deep breathing or meditation](#) to help clear your mind before bed.
- **Unplug.** Turn off electronics an hour before bed. Studies have shown that the blue light emitted out of electronic devices (such as smart phones, tablets, laptops, and televisions) can

affect the sleep-inducing hormone, melatonin. These devices can also overstimulate people and make it harder to wind down and go to sleep.

- **Get some sun.** Exposure to sunlight during the day can also jump start the production of [melatonin](#).
- **Pay attention to the room environment.** Keep the bedroom dark, quiet, and cool for the best sleep. A room temperature between 60–67 degrees Fahrenheit is usually best for a good night’s rest. Fans or humidifiers can create white noise and be soothing.
- **Create a sleep-friendly bedroom.** Get a comfortable mattress and pillow. Some people prefer firm mattresses and pillows, while others prefer softer bedding. Try several mattresses and pillows out at the store to see which type suits you better. Keep televisions, computers, video games, and other electronic equipment out of the bedroom. Try to limit the use of the bed for sleeping and eliminate distractions.
- **Get plenty of exercise during the day.** [Exercise helps combat stress and feelings of restlessness](#). However, exercising too close to bedtime can make it more difficult to fall asleep. Exercise should be completed at least three hours before bedtime.
- **Avoid large meals right before bedtime.** Eating heavily too close to bedtime can interfere with a good night’s sleep.
- **Limit stimulants and alcohol too close to bedtime.** Avoid beverages and food that contain caffeine after late afternoon. Stay away from [nicotine and alcohol](#) close to bedtime.
- **If you must use sleep aids, talk to your health care provider.** Prescription or over-the-counter medications to improve sleep are a short-term solution. Before using sleep medicines, consider their effect on seizures, possible side effects, and any interactions with seizure medicines. Since medications can affect people differently, talk to your health care team before taking any sleep medication.

But What If These Tips Don't Help?

If you have a sleep problem that's not related to your epilepsy, talk to your neurologist. He or she may wonder about a sleep disorder. The doctor will take your sleep history and have you fill out a sleep diary to record your daily sleep behaviors for several weeks. Tests may be needed to check how your sleep is at night and to see if any seizures occur at night that may be part of the problem.

Changes in mood, such as depression and anxiety, can also cause sleep problems. Talking to a [mental health provider](#) may help sort this out. Sometimes counseling or behavior changes help [mood](#) and sleep. If problems persist, [medication for mood](#) may be needed.

Whatever the cause, keep working on good sleep habits and staying healthy!

Learn More

- epilepsy.com article, "[Relationship Between Sleep Apnea and Seizures](#)," March 2018

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