

# TO YOUR HEALTH

Carleton-Willard Village Out-Patient Clinic - 100 Old Billerica Rd., Bedford, MA 01730

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## Sleep Tight Maeve Lobo LICSW



'O weary night, O long and tedious night, Abate thy hours! ...And sleep, that sometimes shuts up sorrow's eye, Steal me a while from my own company.'

William Shakespeare - A Mid Summer Night's Dream

How many of us find ourselves tossing and turning at night? We frequently yearn for a sound sleep, uninterrupted by noise, worries and calls to the bathroom. Sleep patterns are constantly changing, and with aging a peaceful slumber seems impossible. Since a third of our lives are spent sleeping it is important to understand how sleep evolves with age.

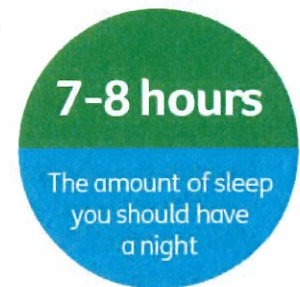
The National Sleep Foundation noted that between 40% - 70% of older adults encounter difficulties with sleep. Some sleep problems identified in seniors are:

- Nocturia or night-time urination increase with age and is a primary cause for a broken sleep. Around 80% of older adults encounter this problem.
- Experiencing pain and feeling uncomfortable leads to a disrupted sleep.
- Medications such as antidepressants and corticosteroids may cause insomnia.
- Excessive daytime drowsiness due to issues like sleep apnea and cognitive impairments affect nocturnal sleep.
- Movement disorders like Restless Leg Syndrome (RLS) cause interruptions while sleeping. Between 9% to 20% of older adults suffer from this condition.
- Stress, anxiety, and isolation also contribute to a fragmented sleep.

A 2003 research by the National Sleep Foundation reported that individuals with multiple health conditions tend to have less than six hours of sleep a night. The poll identified that 24% of adults between the age of 65 and 84 years who had four or more health conditions experienced sleep disruptions.

According to the National Institute of Aging it is a myth that older adults require less sleep. Aim for 7-8 hours of sleep a night.

28% of seniors in Massachusetts get less than 7 hours of sleep a night.



Instead of counting sheep here are some tips for a better nocturnal slumber:

- Keep to a sleep schedule.
- Avoid alcohol and caffeine before bedtime.
- Reduce fluid intakes before bedtime.
- Electronic devices should be shut off 30 minutes before bedtime.
- Exercise regularly.
- Don't eat a large meal before bedtime.
- If you don't fall asleep within 20 minutes, get out of bed and do a quiet activity.
- Make sure your room is at a comfortable temperature.
- Dim the lights as it helps with melatonin production. This is a hormone that helps enhance sleep.





### Light Sleep

During the summer months all of us enjoy the day light savings time. However, we pay severely for this benefit. Light and darkness are the best cues for our bodies to fall asleep. The circadian rhythm or the mental and physical changes that follow the 24-hour clock, are compromised when the clocks spring forward. Circadian rhythms effect hormone release, eating and digesting and body temperature. When these calibrations get misaligned sleep patterns are hampered.

### Sleep disorders

- Insomnia is the inability to stay asleep for an extended period of time. It may involve waking up in the early hours of the morning and being unable to go back to sleep. Insomnia is treated with sedatives, antidepressants, and behaviour modification techniques.
- Restless Leg Syndrome or RLS is an uncomfortable sensation that originates in the lower leg. Itching, aching and throbbing pain are some common symptoms of RLS. The condition appears mostly at night. Iron deficiency and peripheral neuropathy are some of the causes of RLS. Medications that increase dopamine in the brain are used as part of the treatment plan. Muscle relaxants may help induce sleep but do not eliminate the condition.
- Sleep Apnea is a condition that causes breathing to start and stop. Snoring is often associated with this condition. An individual may get up in the morning and feel exhausted. Other symptoms related to this condition is waking up with a dry mouth, morning headaches and irritability. A CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) machine is commonly used to address this problem.

- Narcolepsy is a form of extreme sleepiness during the day or suddenly falling asleep. This is a chronic condition and there is no cure. Medications and lifestyle changes can help an individual manage the symptoms.

### Sleep Safe

Before slipping into bed make sure a bedside lamp is within easy reach. The telephone and lifeline should also be accessible. Have a glass of water handy in case you get up at night. Remove beside rugs and carpets so you don't trip making your way to the bathroom. One in four seniors fall every year and accidents frequently take place at home.



Sleep helps us function through the day. As we age a good night's sleep can be illusive and disruptive. However, there are many simple tools to ensure we keep the sleep demons at bay. Employ them on an everyday basis and observe the gradual changes. In your life . Sleep well and hopefully step into a blissful landscape of dreams.



Illustration by Judith Clay from *Thea's Tree*

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