

Sleep, fatigue and stress in health care workers

COVID-19 mental health and wellbeing resources



What this fact sheet covers:

- Why sleep is important
- Tip for sleeping well
- Online tools that can help

How is COVID-19 impacting sleep?

Sleep can be significantly impacted during times of heightened stress and anxiety. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, many health care workers are reporting extreme tiredness and exhaustion, and difficulties with sleep.

Prior to COVID-19, as a health care worker, you might have already been dealing with long hours, shift work, and demanding and stressful work which impacted on your sleep, and COVID-19 has compounded these problems.

What is good sleep?

Good sleepers usually take less than 30 minutes to fall asleep and will wake up no more than once or twice during the night. Even the best sleepers will have a night every now and then when they take a long time to get to sleep, or when they wake in the middle of the night and find it difficult to get back to sleep. This is often triggered by a stressful event and will usually pass after a night or two.

What is bad sleep?

Insomnia is the most common sleep disorder, which is marked by difficulty falling asleep,

staying asleep or waking too early, and feeling dissatisfied with the quality of your sleep for at least one month. Health care workers can also suffer from the impact of shift work on circadian rhythms.

Why is sleep important?

Sleep is as important to us as a healthy diet and exercise. It serves a range of important functions necessary for human survival, including consolidation of memories, physical growth and recovery, and emotional health.

Insomnia is common, particularly during times of stress, and can significantly impact emotional and physical health and ability to function at work and socially. Inadequate sleep can leave you fatigued and susceptible to depression and anxiety.

Tips for sleeping well

Consciously making changes to your thoughts and behaviours can significantly improve your sleep.

Take care of your mind

To sleep well we know that we have to worry less. Right now, having COVID-19 related worries is normal BUT you can learn to better



manage these worries to reduce their impact on your sleep. Read the factsheet on anxiety for strategies on how to manage anxiety during this high-stress time.

Get regular

Where possible, try and maintain regular sleep/wake times even on days off. While this is a challenge for health care workers working shift work, the goal, where possible, is to vary your sleep/wake times by no more than 2 hours on consecutive nights. This means avoiding excessive sleep-ins on days off. The more consistent you can be, the better.

Implement a regular sleep/wake routine

The hour before bed is critically important – having a consistent wind down routine helps cue the body and mind for sleep.

This routine might involve putting away all devices, spending quiet time with people or pets, doing meditation or relaxation activities, reading a book, having a shower, or preparing food/clothing for the next day. It is important to continue with this routine even if you are going to bed in the morning after night-shift.

Create a positive sleep environment

It is important that your bed and bedroom are quiet, cool and comfortable. Make sure you have curtains or an eye mask to block out light and earplugs if your room is noisy.

Use your bed only for sleep

If possible, try and use your bed/bedroom only for sleeping. This will strengthen the association of your bed with sleep.

If you find yourself in bed for more than half an hour unable to get to sleep, get out of bed and quietly do something relaxing in dim light in another part of your home. The goal is to avoid associating your bed with feelings of frustration and anxiety at not being able to sleep.

Exercise and diet

Exercising during the day away from bedtime is one of the best things you can do to improve your sleep. Even if you feel tired or exhausted, a quick walk or home workout will help you get to sleep the following night. A healthy diet also contributes to improved sleep and wellbeing.

Avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol

If it's unrealistic for you to completely avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol during this stressful time try and limit consuming them for at least 4-6 hours leading up to your bedtime. They disrupt sleep and actually increase tiredness and fatigue in the longer term.

Get sunlight

If possible, try and expose yourself to sunlight as soon as possible after waking as the sun helps regulate your circadian rhythms.

Change the way you think about sleep

While sleep is important, focusing too much on how little sleep you are getting can be reinforcing. Try and be realistic and reframe negative thoughts you might be having.

If you've had one bad night's sleep, instead of wondering if you'll ever sleep well again, try and think that tonight you will sleep much better



as you'll be so tired. Try and remember nights that you slept well, not just nights that you slept poorly as there are often easier to remember.

What to do if these tips don't work

If you think you might have chronic insomnia, i.e. you are not able to sleep three nights a week for three months or longer, then you need to talk with your GP about treatment options.

Online tools that can help

The THIS WAY UP Insomnia program is an online tool which teaches cognitive behavioural strategies to help you get a better night's sleep. Or if it's stress or anxiety that's making it difficult to switch you mind off from worry, or wind down at night, try the THIS WAY UP Stress Course.

Helpful online tools and resources

myCompass

www.mycompass.org.au

Black Dog Institute Online Clinic

onlineclinic.blackdoginstitute.org.au

This Way Up

thiswayup.org.au

MindSpot

mindspot.org.au

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