

## **Sleep Guidelines During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Source: [Sleep Foundation.org](https://www.sleepfoundation.org)

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the world into uncharted waters. Countries around the world have been working to contain a rapidly spreading pandemic by implementing public health measures, such as social distancing. With continuous changes coming on so quickly, it's understandable that the importance of sleep is flying under the radar. As we try to remain healthy in a time of COVID-19, focusing on sleeping well offers tremendous benefits.

Sleep is critical to physical health and effective functioning of the immune system. It's also a key promoter of emotional wellness and mental health, helping to beat back stress, depression, and anxiety. Whether you've had sleeping problems before COVID-19 or if they've only come on recently, there are concrete steps that you can take to improve your sleep during this global pandemic.

### **What Are the Challenges to Sleep During a Pandemic?**

Millions of people suffered from insomnia before the coronavirus, and unfortunately, the pandemic creates a host of new challenges even for people who previously had no sleeping problems.

The coronavirus pandemic doesn't affect everyone in the same way. Of course, patients with the virus and front-line medical workers face the brunt of the direct impacts of the disease. But as we've seen across the world, the consequences have spread far and wide, and pose significant barriers to sleep.

### **Disruption of Daily Life**

Social distancing, quarantines, working-from-home: all bring profound changes to normal routines for people of all ages and walks of life.

- It can be difficult to adjust to a new daily schedule or lack of a schedule.
- Keeping track of the time, and even the day, can be hard without typical time "anchors" like dropping kids off at school, arriving at the office each day, attending recurring social events, or going to the gym.
- Being home more often, especially if it has low levels of natural light, may reduce light-based cues for wakefulness and sleep, known as zeitgebers, which are crucial to our circadian rhythm.
- If you are working from home or your weekly hours have been decreased due to COVID-19, you may be tempted to oversleep in the mornings. Sleeping more than seven to eight hours per night can make waking up on time much more difficult, even if you use an alarm. Over sleepers may also feel groggy, irritable and unfocused throughout the day.

## **Anxiety and Worry**

Naturally, many people fear catching the coronavirus because they don't want to get sick or infect other people inadvertently. Most people have close friends or family who are older or in high-risk groups because of pre-existing conditions, spurring worries about their health and safety.

There's still so much unknown about this pandemic – how much the disease will spread, how long social distancing and mandatory mask wearing will last, when there will be a vaccine – and such uncertainty often brings anxiety that disrupts sleep as a racing mind keeps the body tossing and turning.

## **Depression and Isolation**

This crisis can bring about isolation and depression that may be even worse for people who have a loved one who is sick or has passed away from COVID-19. Grief and depression can be exacerbated by isolation at home, and both are known to have the potential to cause significant sleeping problems.

## **Greater Family and Work Stress**

Many families are under serious stress as a result of the coronavirus. Canceled trips, isolation from friends, and an abundance of time cooped up at home can place a strain on anyone. Keeping up with work-from-home obligations or managing a house full of children who are accustomed to being at school can pose real problems, generating stress and discord that have been shown to be barriers to sleep.

## **Excess Screen Time**

Whether it's checking the news on your phone, joining a Zoom with family, binge-watching Netflix, or putting in extra hours staring at a computer while working-from-home, social distancing can mean a huge increase in screen time.

Excess screen time, especially later in the evening, can have a detrimental impact on sleep. Not only can it stimulate the brain in ways that make it hard to wind down, but the blue light from screens can suppress the natural production of melatonin, a hormone that the body makes to help us sleep.

## **Stress-Related Fatigue**

The chronic stress of living through a pandemic can lead to a host of physical symptoms, including persistent headaches, memory lapses, and digestive problems. Stress-related fatigue is another common side effect. The Mayo Clinic defines fatigue as “a nearly constant state of weariness that develops over time and reduces your energy, motivation and concentration.” Even if you receive an adequate amount of sleep at night, fatigue can still leave you feeling tired and unmotivated in the morning.

## Why is Sleep Important During a Pandemic?

Sleep is a critical biological process, and the truth is that it's always important. When confronting the COVID-19 pandemic, though, sleep becomes even more essential because of its wide-ranging benefits for physical and mental health.

- **Sleep empowers an effective immune system.** Solid nightly rest strengthens our body's defenses, and studies have even found that lack of sleep can make some vaccines less effective.
- **Sleep heightens brain function.** Our mind works better when we get good sleep, contributing to complex thinking, learning, memory, and decision-making. For adults and children adapting to work and school at home, good sleep can help them stay sharp.
- **Sleep enhances mood.** Lack of sleep can make a person irritable, drag down their energy level, and cause or worsen feelings of depression.
- **Sleep improves mental health.** Besides depression, studies have found that a lack of sleep is linked with mental health conditions like anxiety disorder, bipolar disorder, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Experts agree that getting consistent, high-quality sleep improves virtually all aspects of health, which is why it is worthy of our attention during the coronavirus pandemic.

## Our Guidelines to Sleeping Well During the COVID-19 Outbreak

In spite of the daunting challenges, there are a handful of steps that can promote better sleep during the coronavirus pandemic. If these efforts don't pay off immediately, don't give up. It can take time to stabilize your sleep, and you may find that you need to adapt these suggestions to best fit your specific situation.

### Set Your Schedule and Routine

Establishing a routine can facilitate a sense of normalcy even in abnormal times. It's easier for your mind and body to acclimate to a consistent sleep schedule, which is why health experts have long recommended avoiding major variation in your daily sleep times.

Sleep-specific aspects of your daily schedule should include:

- **Wake-Up Time:** Set your alarm, bypass the snooze button, and have a fixed time to get every day started.
- **Wind-Down Time:** This is an important time to relax and get ready for bed. It can involve things like light reading, stretching, and meditating along with preparations for bed like putting on pajamas and brushing your teeth. Given the stress of the coronavirus pandemic, it's wise to give yourself extra wind-down time each night.
- **Bedtime:** Pick a consistent time to actually turn out the lights and try to fall asleep.

In addition to time spent sleeping and getting ready for bed, it can be helpful to incorporate steady routines to provide time cues throughout the day, including:

- Showering and getting dressed even if you aren't leaving the house.
- Eating meals at the same time each day.
- Blocking off specific time periods for work and exercise.

### **Reserve Your Bed for Sleep**

Sleep experts emphasize the importance of creating an association in your mind between your bed and sleep. This means that working-from-home shouldn't be working-from-bed. It also means avoiding bringing a laptop into bed to watch a movie or series.

On any given night, if you find that you're having a hard time sleeping, don't spend more than 20 minutes tossing and turning. Instead, get out of bed and do something relaxing in very low light, and then head back to bed to try to fall asleep. Frequently changing your sheets, fluffing your pillows, and making your bed can keep your bed feeling fresh, creating a comfortable and inviting setting to doze off.

### **See the Light**

Exposure to light plays a crucial role in helping our bodies regulate sleep in a healthy way. As you deal with disruptions to daily life, you may need to take steps so that light-based cues have a positive effect on your circadian rhythm.

- If you can, spend some time outside in natural light. Even if the sun isn't shining brightly, natural light still has positive effects on circadian rhythm. Many people find outdoor time is most beneficial in the morning, and as an added bonus, it's an opportunity to get fresh air.
- As much as possible, open windows and blinds to let light into your home during the day.
- Be mindful of screen time. The blue light produced by electronic devices, such as mobile phones, tablets, and computers, has been found to interfere with the body's natural sleep-promoting processes. As much as possible, avoid using these devices for an hour before bed. You can also use device settings or special apps that reduce or filter blue light.

### **Be Careful with Naps**

While a short power nap early in the afternoon can be useful to some people, it's best to avoid long naps or naps later in the day that can hinder nighttime sleep.

### **Stay Active**

It's easy to overlook exercise with everything happening in the world, but regular daily activity has numerous important benefits, including for sleep.

If you can go for a walk while maintaining a safe distance from other people, that's a great option. If not, there is a wealth of resources online for all types and levels of exercise. Many gyms and yoga and dance studios are live-streaming free classes during this period of social distancing.

### **Practice Kindness and Foster Connection**

It might not seem critical to your sleep, but kindness and connection can reduce stress and its harmful effects on mood and sleep.

Despite all the bad news that you may come across, try to find some positive stories, such as how people are supporting one another through the pandemic. You can use technology to stay in touch with friends and family so that you can maintain social connections despite the need for social distancing.

### **Utilize Relaxation Techniques**

Finding ways to relax can be a potent tool in improving your sleep. Deep breathing, stretching, yoga, mindfulness meditation, calming music, and quiet reading are just a few examples of relaxation techniques that you can build into your routines. If you're not sure where to get started, check out smartphone apps like Headspace and Calm that have programs designed for people new to meditation.

Another relaxation strategy during this pandemic is to avoid becoming overwhelmed by coronavirus-related news. For example, you can try techniques including:

- Bookmarking one or two trusted news sites and visiting them only during a limited, pre-set amount of time each day.
- Cutting down the total time that you spend scrolling on social media. If you want a hand in this effort, a number of apps can monitor and even block your time on social media sites or apps each day.
- Scheduling phone or video calls with friends and family and agreeing in advance to focus on topics other than the coronavirus.

### **Watch What You Eat and Drink**

Keeping a healthy diet can promote good sleep. In particular, be cautious with the intake of alcohol and caffeine, especially later in the day, as both can disrupt the quantity and quality of your sleep.

### **Contact Your Doctor if Necessary**

If you have severe or worsening sleep or other health problems, it is advisable to be in touch with your doctor. Many doctors are increasing availability via email or telemedicine to allow patients to discuss concerns without having to physically visit their office.

### **Trusted Resources About COVID-19**

With news about the novel coronavirus moving at a mile-a-minute, it's important to have resources for trusted, evidence-based information. Two such sources include the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Their sites offer key information about COVID-19, including how to keep your family and community safe and how to avoid coronavirus myths.