

Why Seniors Have Sleep Problems and How To Fix Them



Human beings, animals, and even plants operate on biological cycles of approximately 24 hours, called circadian rhythms. These cycles need to adjust to match the cycles of the sun. Most adults sleep about seven to eight hours each night. It feels more natural to awaken with the sunlight, and go to sleep after dusk.

Of course, not everyone follows this cycle. Some animals are nocturnal, and some people find themselves sleep better during the day. All these patterns have their basis in genetics, combined with environmental influences.

But for many people, sleep is an elusive dream.

In particular, **seniors commonly suffer from disrupted sleep patterns.** In fact, nationwide polls indicate that most American seniors suffer from at least one problem with sleep. The hazards are clear – weakened immunity, cognitive confusion, daytime drowsiness – all of which can put a vulnerable population at greater risk for accidents and illness.

Why are seniors so susceptible? Commonly cited answers include bladder problems and sleep apnea. Another cause may be the use of prescription drugs, which can interfere with natural circadian rhythms.

But two hidden changes in our bodies occur as we age, and are responsible for some basic sleep problems.

Hidden Change #1: Melatonin

When babies are about three months old, they start daily production of melatonin, a substance that helps them regulate their sleep-wake cycle. Melatonin production increases as they get older, reaching a peak during the toddler years. However, puberty brings a sharp drop in melatonin production, and as we march into adulthood, we make less and less of this sleep-promoting substance. **In old age, melatonin production decreases further, in most (but not all) people.**

Often, lower melatonin levels make it harder to get to sleep, or stay asleep. In some cases, though, older people find themselves falling asleep too early, and their goal is to shift sleep later.

What You Can Do. To combat this problem, people can take melatonin. Melatonin is available in drugstores, albeit in doses many times higher than the amount you need to tweak your system. That is why CET scientists are developing microdoses of melatonin which are much smaller than commonly available doses, and thus closer to the amount your body needs to do the trick, and no more. If possible, use a timed-release formulation of melatonin, and be sure to take the doses at the right time to get ideal results. You can find out more about microdoses [here](#).

Hidden Change #2: Our Eyes

After age 40, our eyes start creating a liquid filter that lessens the amount of light that reaches our retina, and our pupils get smaller. The world gets darker, and it starts to affect the ability of our inner clock to regulate daily light cycles.

What You Can Do About It. Since the aging eye cannot take in as much light as younger eyes, compensate by using more light during the day, until about 2-3 hours before bedtime, so as not to interfere with the onset of nighttime melatonin production. For the elderly person who is falling asleep too early, leave the bright lights on longer, until about 30 minutes before bedtime, to see if the circadian rhythm can be delayed, and provide a later sleep onset signal.

Soft-white light bulbs rated at 2,700 or 3,000 Kelvin are ideal. Use glare-reducing diffusion filters, if appropriate. And remember, the cost of sufficient lighting will pay off by maintaining your circadian rhythms.

Other Ways to Safeguard Your Sleep

If you nap, remember an ideal nap is early (before 3 PM), so it does not interfere with getting to sleep at night. Try to nap in quiet, restful settings, and make naps short (perhaps as short as five minutes, and no longer than a half hour).

If you usually wake up to use the bathroom, use [amber-colored nightlights](#) (vs regular white light) to avoid the energizing blue spectrum within white light, which makes it hard to get back to sleep.

Please visit our website, cet.org, and read other fact sheets, such as [How to Tame Your Circadian Rhythms on a Budget: Free, or Low-Cost, Ways to Get Your Life in Sync with Nature](#) for more information.