

An ADDitude Guide for Adults

Sleeping Better with ADHD



From the ADHD Experts at

ADDITUDE

Strategies and Support for ADHD & LD

ADDITUDE | Expert eBook

A trusted source of advice and information for families touched by attention-deficit disorder—
and a voice of inspiration to help people with ADHD find success at home, at school, and on the job.

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Introduction

ADHD is linked to an array of sleep difficulties – trouble getting to bed at a reasonable time, quieting a buzzing brain once the lights are out, staying asleep through the night, and waking up on time. Studies show that anywhere from a quarter to half of people with ADHD have a diagnosable sleep disorder.

ADHD makes it harder to get enough sleep, and being sleep deprived makes it harder to manage ADHD symptoms. Insufficient sleep is also tied to other health problems and complications like a weakened immune system, decreased focus and concentration, negative moods, and obesity. Sleep problems impact daily functioning in practically all aspects of life.

Despite the ADHD brain's tendency toward sleep problems, there are strategies and solutions available to tackle these issues and achieve better, quality sleep.

Part One: Common ADHD Sleep Problems and Why They Occur

Adults with ADHD commonly report experiencing the following sleep difficulties:

- Difficulty falling and staying asleep
- Unwillingness to nap, even when exhausted
- Increased alertness/activity during evening hours
- Late bed times
- Difficulty awakening, regardless of ample sleep
- Tiredness despite sleep
- Narcolepsy
- Restless Leg Syndrome
- Bruxism (teeth grinding)
- Sleep paralysis
- Obstructive sleep apnea

Current understandings point to biology, genetics, and ADHD symptoms as causes behind the ADHD-sleep connection.

Biological Roots of Sleep Problems

Sleep involves neurotransmitters that are also implicated in ADHD. GABA, for example, is less available in individuals with ADHD, which can make it difficult to give in to sleep.

Delayed sleep phase syndrome (DSPS), a circadian rhythm abnormality, is also common in many adults with ADHD. The same goes for a delay in onset of melatonin, a hormone associated with sleep.

Genetic Roots of Sleep Problems

Studies show that the catechol-O-methyltransferase (COMT) gene is linked to ADHD. This gene is also implicated in dopamine regulation, which in turn is implicated in sleep-wake regulation.

ADHD-Related Roots of Sleep Problems

The impact of ADHD symptoms on daily life — from forgetfulness, poor planning and organizational skills, to trouble with sustained attention and even “shutting down the mind” — can create less-than-optimal environments for sleep later in the evening. Many people with ADHD, however, also take to staying up late because their energy and focus levels surge at night.

Part Two: How to Sleep Better with ADHD

Step 1: Start by Assessing Current Sleep Habits

Keep a sleep diary to clearly see where and when problems with sleep specifically arise. The sleep diary should track:

- **Actual hours slept each night.** This includes duration, sleep and wake times, and the time spent in bed trying to fall asleep. The National Sleep Foundation recommends 7 to 9 hours of sleep for adults. Note any significant variation in weekday versus weekend sleeping hours (too much of a difference is not ideal for quality sleep).
- **Sleep locations.** Where do you tend to fall asleep? Is it always in bed? Do you nap on the couch? Elsewhere?
- **Environment.** When you sleep, is the television on? Are you listening to music? Can noise outside easily be heard?
- **Awakenings through the night.** Note the time you wake up, how long it takes to get back to sleep, and causes (nightmares, noises, etc.).
- **Daytime naps,** no matter how long or often, should be logged.
- **If and how sleep habits affect others in the household.** Sometimes, others in our household have more insights into our sleep patterns than we do. See what they have to say about snoring, sleepwalking, tossing and turning, and ask about any other observations they may have.

Step 2: Consider a Sleep Study

This type of assessment looks at brain waves, blood oxygen levels, breathing patterns, and more to detect the presence of any sleep disorders such as sleep apnea, which can be treated with a CPAP machine.

Obstructed breathing, which could be caused by an anatomical issue like a deviated septum, can be corrected through a septoplasty.

Step 3: Practice Better Sleep Hygiene

Sleep hygiene involves keeping sleep-friendly habits and practices related to initiation, maintenance, and/or waking. Response to these strategies will vary; give them a try before ruling any one out.

- **Use your bed only for sleep or sex.** Avoid working, reading, or engaging in other activities while in bed.
- **Have a set bed time.** Whether intentional or not, forgoing a set bedtime makes it impossible to manage time through the evening, as there is no deadline against which to manage time. Therefore, set a bedtime and think of it like a work deadline. Also, if you're trying to go to sleep earlier, try scaling back your bed time in 20-minute intervals. For example, if you're currently sleeping at around 2 a.m., and your goal is to sleep by 11:30 p.m., aim to sleep at 1:40 a.m. the first night, 1:20 a.m. the second, and so on.
- **Assess napping habits.** For some, napping during the day leaves the brain feeling groggy. What's more, it can make falling asleep at night difficult. On the other hand, some people swear by quick power naps during the day to help them feel replenished.
- **Avoid caffeine after a certain time.** Consuming caffeine later in the day can disrupt sleep for some people.
- **Have a bedtime routine** to help shift the mind into sleep mode. Take a warm bath, listen to light music (or put on a sound machine), dim the lights, and change into pajamas. It may help to even set a "get ready for bed" alarm to start the routine.
- **Unplug from technology and screens** as you approach bedtime. As part of your wind-down routine, have an end-time to turn off the TV, stop playing video games, and put your phone on "do not disturb" mode.
- **Make sure the room is dark.** Close the curtains and dim the lights from clocks and other electronic devices. Use an eye mask.
- **Keep the room at a comfortable temperature.** For some, that may mean keeping the room cool, which can make you more inclined to stay in your warm bed.
- **Practice breathing exercises** to relax and calm the mind and body.

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- **Avoid staying awake in bed too long.** If it is taking longer than half an hour to fall asleep, it's better to get out of bed and do a non-stimulating activity. Sometimes, even standing next to your bed (however strange that sounds) and waiting for the sleepiness to set in helps.
- **Forget the snooze button.** Reaching for the snooze button (or setting multiple wake up alarms) is a sure way to cheat yourself out of sustained, restorative sleep. Have one alarm, and put it somewhere where you'll have to get up out of bed to turn it off.

Trying to calm a racing mind?

- Avoid ruminating by externalizing your thoughts. Write them down in a journal, or talk about them with someone you trust.
- Listen to something familiar so that the mind can focus “just enough” on anything other than your own thoughts. Podcasts or favorite songs are great for this.
- De-stress. Apart from breathing exercises mentioned above, meditation, prayer, laughter, muscle relaxation, and other activities can help you better respond to the stressors that interfere with sleep.

Take a look at your habits during the day and evening to see how they influence your bedtime and sleep:

- **Are you stealing time from sleep to do things that you otherwise might not do?** Do you stay up late, for example, as a way to get some private quiet time? While the desire is valid, you may be unintentionally making your life harder. Try to find other times to wind down.
- Are things like getting stuck on Facebook before bed keeping you up? Or was it starting work late this morning and having to stay late to finish? In all, **try to get the important stuff done during the day**, or make time for Facebook and other leisure activities before bed time. If time-management skills are lagging, try reaching out to an ADHD coach or another professional for help.
- **How much movement do you get in your day?** Exercising could be a great way to regulate sleep and energy levels. Try not to exercise too close to bedtime, however.

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- **Do you get any sunlight through the day?** Make sure to do so, as it helps regulate your circadian rhythm.

Step 4: Consider Medications and Supplements

Stimulants for treating ADHD can target the same issues that trigger sleep problems. For some, the time of day the dose is taken can impact sleep. In all, the optimal dose of medication is one that minimizes the most debilitating ADHD symptoms with the fewest number of side effects. Talk to your doctor about your sleep problems to see if any adjustments to your medications are warranted.

Many adults, ADHD or not, report better sleep after taking **melatonin**. This hormone is naturally produced in the brain, and helps signal to the mind and body that it's time to sleep. It is best to take melatonin one to two hours before bedtime. Make sure to talk to your doctor about melatonin and whether it is safe for you.

There are other substances that are typically prescribed if sleep problems persist, including Periactin, Clonidine, and antidepressant medications. As with any medication or supplement, ask your doctor if you are a good candidate for these options.

Part Three: Apps for Better Sleep

For extra help relaxing the mind and body, and for deeper insights into your sleep patterns, try these reader-recommended apps and tools.

Sleep Apps

- **Sleep Cycle:** Available for iPhone and Android, this free app tracks and analyzes your sleep cycles, waking you up during your lightest sleep phase so you'll feel optimally rested.
- **Sleep as Android:** This sleep-cycle tracking app records snoring, heart rate, and other statistics to help you fall asleep quickly and wake you up at the optimal time; free trial available.
- **Garmin:** The Advanced Sleep Monitoring feature, compatible with specific versions of the Garmin watch, uses an optical heart rate sensor to track sleep patterns.
- **Atmosphere:** Binaural Therapy Meditation: Binaural beats, a form of soundwave therapy, are generated with this app to increase calm and focus; free trial available.
- **Pillow:** This free iPhone app allows you to explore personal trends, such as sleep apnea and sleep talking, and compare your sleep quality with 10 Apple Health metrics that affect sleep.
- **Sanvello:** Covered by some health plans, this app combines self-care with a daily mood tracker, peer support from chat groups, life coaching, and therapy with licensed clinicians; free trial available.
- **SleepTown:** For the price of \$1.99, build steady and healthy sleep habits by waking up and creating a “building” that is destroyed if you fail to reach your goal.
- **Rain Rain Sleep Sounds:** This app offers more than 100 free, high-quality sounds to help you fall asleep, sooth anxiety, and increase focus.
- **Relax Melodies:** Choose from free guided medications, sounds, music, and bedtime stories to create your own playlist to promote relaxation.
- **Sleep With Me podcast:** This storytelling podcast caters to adults with sleep difficulties; subscribe for free access to past episodes.

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Guided Meditation Apps

- **Calm**: With a free trial, you can try the top-rated app for guided meditation, which helps promote restful sleep by pairing relaxing music with scenic imagery.
- **InsightTimer**: This app offers a free library of mindfulness experts, curated music to help with sleep and relaxation, and free access to live-streamed yoga classes.
- **Medito**: Available on iOS and Android, this free app is designed for people who are new to meditation and includes courses for different levels of experience.
- **Ten Percent Happier**: This app includes access to experts teaching the basics of meditation and offers guided meditations to improve happiness and sleep and decrease stress; free trial available.