

Sleepstation

# Guide to better sleep for NHS staff

[sleepstation.org.uk](https://sleepstation.org.uk)

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# Thank-you for all that you're doing to support and protect our communities in response to COVID-19

We hope that you will find this guide helpful. If you're worried about your sleep, struggling to manage shift work or just need someone to talk to, we can help. Our support team is trained to help people to manage worry and anxiety as well as sleep problems. **Our support will be freely available for NHS staff with sleep problems until this crisis is over.** If you need us, please register for help here: [sleepstation.org.uk/keyworker-sleep-support](https://sleepstation.org.uk/keyworker-sleep-support)



**Alison Gardiner**  
Chief Executive



**If you were sleeping well before this crisis, but are struggling with sleep now, what you're experiencing is a normal reaction to what's happening and your sleep could be fixed fairly easily.**

During this difficult time, it's perfectly natural to feel anxious. **We're in a scary situation.** It's hard to sleep when we're anxious and this is quite normal. If there is something to worry about, it makes much more sense for us to be awake so that we can respond to the problem. This is a natural, protective response. We remain alert when we feel under threat, to protect us from danger. It wouldn't, for example, make sense to be asleep if there was a wolf in our bedroom.

However, COVID-19 isn't a wolf that could creep up on us in the night, and being awake isn't going to help us fight it. In fact, losing sleep is probably going to have the opposite effect. **If you're struggling to sleep at the moment, the advice in this guide can help you sleep better.**

# Who are we, and how we can help?

Sleepstation is an **NHS accredited** sleep improvement programme. Our service is delivered entirely online. We've been helping people sleep better without seeing them in person for almost 10 years. We have a **secure online messaging service** that we use to discuss problems in a safe and confidential way. Our online service is just as effective as clinic-based services, sometimes even more effective.

We've supported many thousands of people this way:

[sleepstation.org.uk/patient-stories](https://sleepstation.org.uk/patient-stories)

Our NHS services are normally available to people with long-term (chronic) sleep problems.

We are seeing an increase in the number of people coming to us for help to manage new sleep problems. In particular, for those struggling with anxiety related to COVID-19.

In response to this, **we've prepared a self-help guide for those who are struggling.**



# Small changes can make big differences

**This guide provides practical advice to help you sleep better.**

We don't want you to have to worry about sleep on top of everything else. So this guide outlines some very effective, tried and tested, changes that are simple to implement. Small things really do matter. You may not have to change a lot, but it could make a big difference to your sleep.

If your sleep problem doesn't get better over the next few weeks, we can help further.

**Funding has now been allocated to allow us to provide support, including access to our secure messaging service, for any NHS colleague who is struggling to sleep at this time Key workers and NHS staff can register here for support:**

[sleepstation.org.uk/keyworker-sleep-support](https://sleepstation.org.uk/keyworker-sleep-support)



This guide has been prepared by Dr Neil Stanley, our resident Sleep Expert. Neil has been involved in sleep research for 38 years and has published 38 peer-review papers.

# Get some sunlight

**Try to spend at least 30 minutes each day in natural sunlight.**

- Exposure to sunlight (especially morning light) improves sleep.
- We get Vitamin D from sunlight and certain foods.
- Vitamin D can help protect against acute respiratory infections.

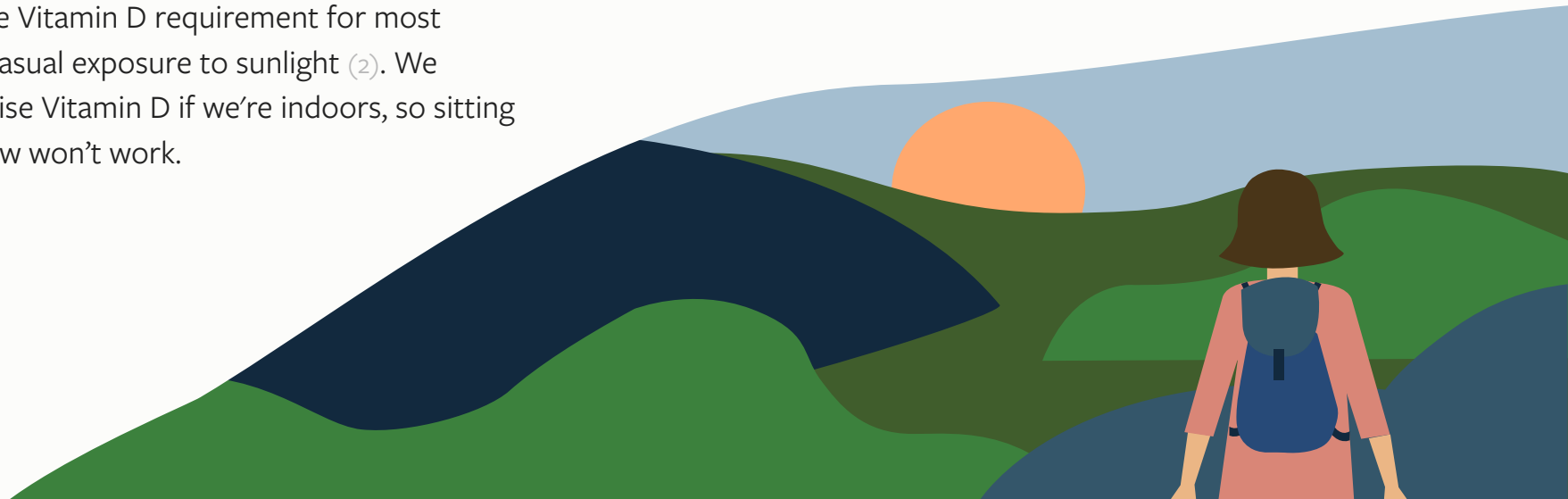
Vitamin D helps us absorb calcium which is a critical mineral in the formation of strong bones. Significantly, there is also data which shows that correct Vitamin D levels can help protect against acute respiratory infections <sup>(1)</sup>.

More than 90% of the Vitamin D requirement for most people comes from casual exposure to sunlight <sup>(2)</sup>. We cannot photosynthesise Vitamin D if we're indoors, so sitting beside a sunny window won't work.

Our food can also be an important source of Vitamin D, especially if we are unable to get outside.

Foods that contain Vitamin D include: oily fish such as salmon, sardines, pilchards, trout, herring and kippers and also cod liver oil, egg yolk, meat, offal and milk. Some foods, such as certain breakfast cereals, are also fortified with Vitamin D.

Shift work may mean that movement is restricted. However, it is essential for good physical, mental and emotional health that you get some outdoor exposure to daylight or eat foods that contain Vitamin D.

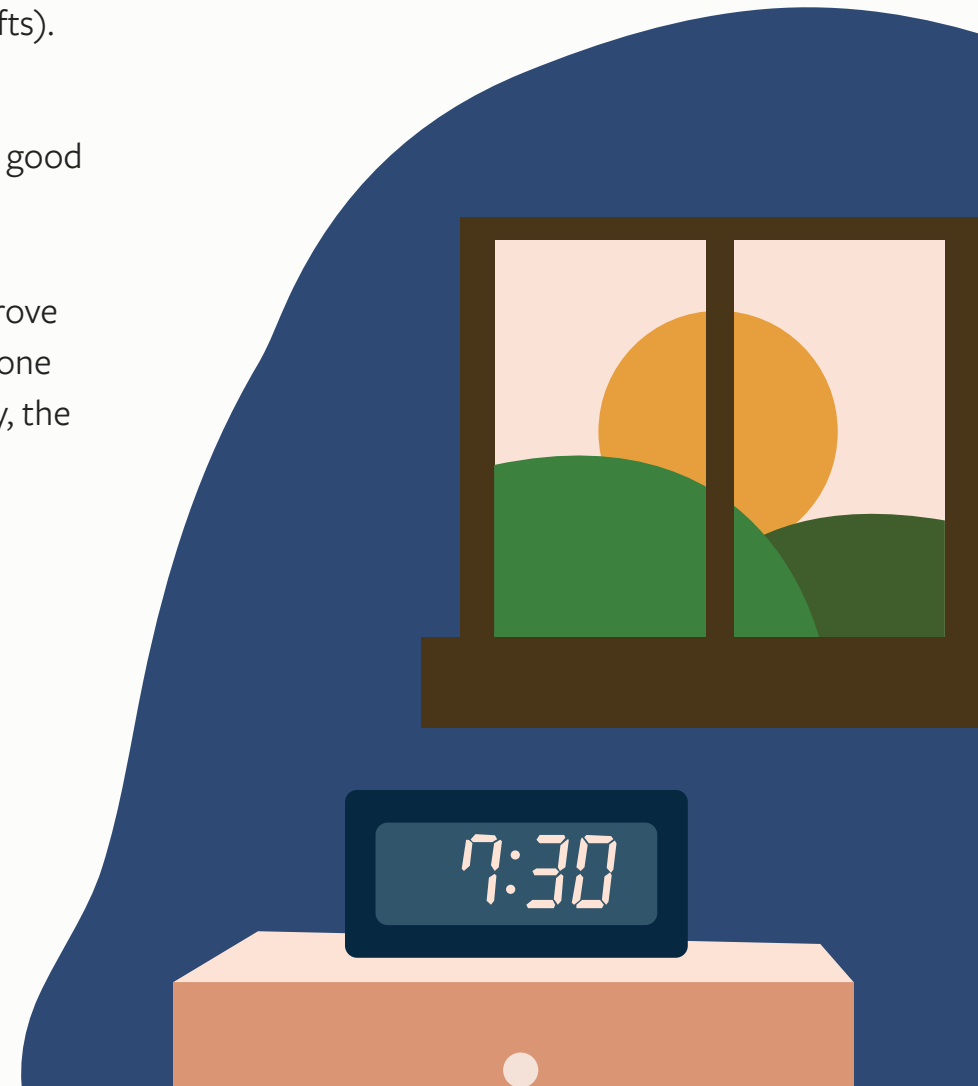


# Try to maintain a routine, if possible

We understand that this might be the hardest thing to do, given that many of the measures being introduced in response to this crisis won't be under our control. However, you can improve your sleep and reduce anxious feelings by:

- Getting up at the same time each day (if you're not working variable shifts).
- Exercising regularly (pick something you enjoy).
- Making sure to get outside in the daylight each day (while maintaining a good distance from others).

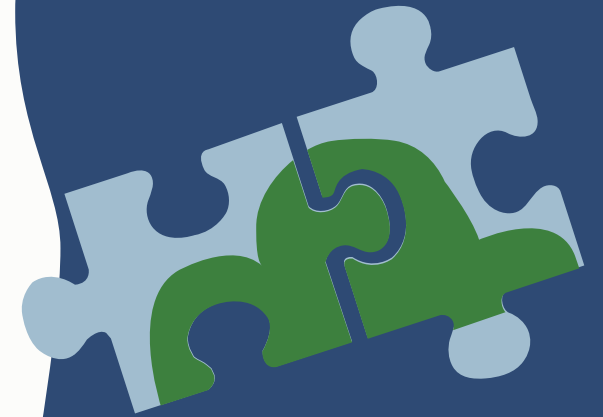
**The body craves consistency** and having a regular wake up time can improve sleep. This is because the body actually starts preparing to wake up about one hour before you actually wake. When we get up at different times each day, the body doesn't know when to prepare for wake and, when we are awakened unexpectedly, this can cause that groggy feeling in the morning.



# Quiet your mind

A quiet mind is key to falling asleep. **Anything that helps you achieve a quiet mind will help you sleep.** Sleep is a very individual thing - **if something helps you get to sleep and stay asleep then don't change it.** You may have heard the saying 'one person's relaxation is another person's torture' - what works for someone else may not work for you. Do whatever works for you.

- Many people find it helpful to focus on their breathing - breathe in and out slowly and deeply - while visualising a tranquil scene.
- Exercise can provide an outlet for frustrations and releases mood-enhancing endorphins. For many people, yoga can be particularly effective at reducing anxiety and stress.
- Read a book, but nothing too taxing.
- Do a puzzle.
- Chat to a loved one.
- Listen to your favourite music as it can lower blood pressure and quieten your mind.





# Put your day to bed before you go to bed

- Don't open the gas bill just before bed or argue with your partner as you switch the light off (remember when your granny said 'don't go to bed angry' - she was right).
- It's best to avoid potential stressors, e.g. news updates, too close to bedtime at night.
- Don't lie in bed awake. If you are tossing and turning for more than 30 minutes at the start of the night, or 20 minutes during the night, it may be helpful to get out of bed, or switch the light on, and do something else. Only go back to bed when you feel sleepy again. If you still don't fall asleep then get up, do something else and go back to bed when you are sleepy.



# Distract yourself

Distraction is a powerful technique that you can use to quiet your mind and get a better night's sleep. Simple distraction techniques include:

- Mouthing out a meaningless word (like 'the') over and over while in bed. Repeating something meaningless over and over in your mind can block out unwanted thoughts that might be keeping you awake.
- Picking a category (e.g. blue things) and thinking of all the things you can in that category. Switch category if you need to.
- Thinking about the good things that have happened during the past day. Even during this crisis, we can find positivity around us if we look for a positive thread.
- Accepting your thoughts as they are and not trying to fight them.
- Think of something that will steer you away from your worries, rather than something that will lead you back to them.

All of these techniques are forms of thought blocking and you can read more about how and why they work on our articles page:

[sleepstation.org.uk/articles](https://sleepstation.org.uk/articles)



# Fact check - Sleep and immunity

You might have read one of several articles focusing on sleep and the immune system. Many of these stories suggest that poor sleep can increase your chances of being infected by the common cold.

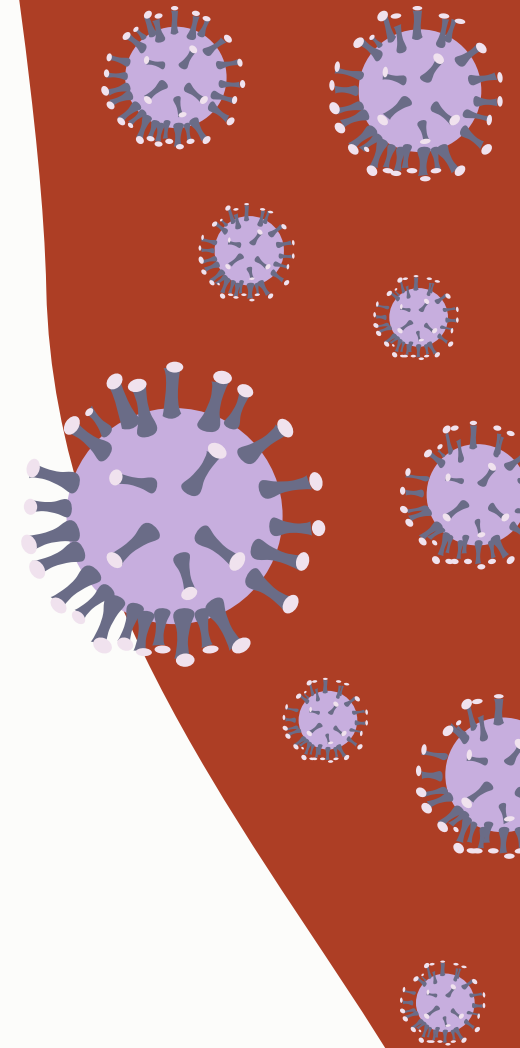
It should be noted that COVID-19 is not the common cold and there is no scientific evidence, at present, that sleep by itself offers any additional protection from infection.

It is vital that the immune system functions at full capacity to prevent infection and fight disease (3). Good sleep does ensure that the immune system is at its strongest. However, good sleep is only one part of a healthy lifestyle, along with a nutritious diet and moderate exercise.

**If you're sleeping well, getting even more sleep will not additionally strengthen, or boost, your immune system.** However, if you're regularly not sleeping well, then there are many reasons why you should try to get better sleep. Improving your immune function is just one of them.

The only time that sleep/bed-rest is really important is if you are infected because then sleep/bed-rest gives the body the best chance of fighting, and beating, the infection.

We know it may seem difficult, but worrying that you will weaken your immune function and increase the chances of contracting coronavirus if you don't sleep well is a sure-fire way of not getting a good night's sleep.



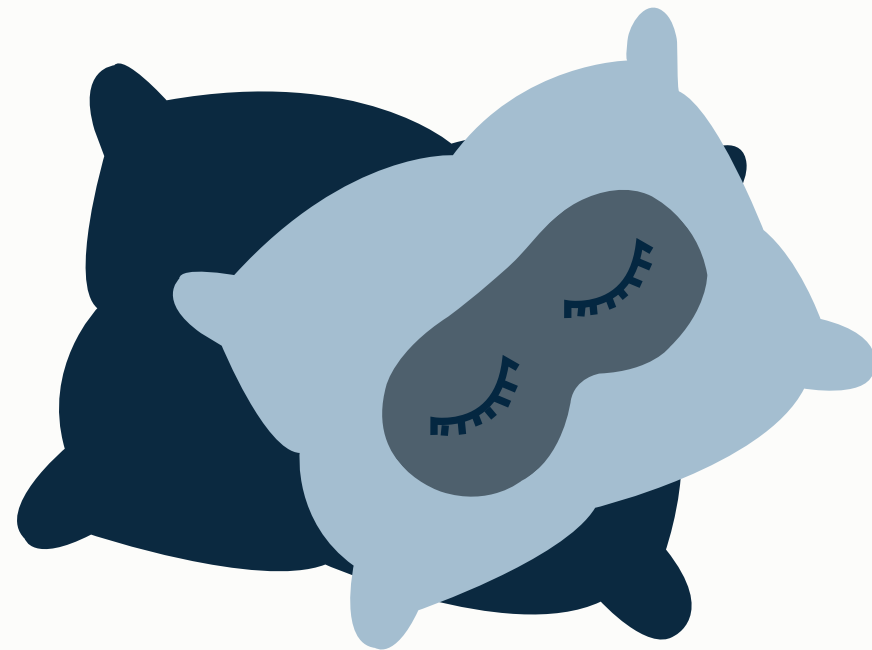
# How to get good sleep, even if you're a shift worker

To be able to sleep regularly and consistently (especially as a shift worker), your bedroom needs to be dark, quiet and cool. To achieve darkness during daylight hours fit heavy curtains or blackout blinds. If that is not possible, use an eyeshade and cover up any light sources within the bedroom.

The day is, by nature, noisier than the night so consider using earplugs if you need to sleep during the day because you're working a night shift.

Talk to your partner, children or housemates (whoever you share your home with). Make sure they understand how important it is that you sleep well. These chats can help reduce noise levels in the house if/when you are trying to sleep during the day before a night shift.

- Your bedroom should be cool, dark and quiet.
- Consider wearing earplugs if you're trying to sleep during the day.
- If you live with others, talk to them - remind them that you need quiet to sleep well.



# Sleep is triggered by a drop in body temperature

To get good sleep, you need to lose approximately one degree of body temperature (4). We cool down naturally during the night but the body temperature is higher during the day. So, to sleep during the day you need to reduce your body temperature. **You can do this by:**

- avoiding eating big, sugary, fatty meals before sleep.
- having a warm shower before bed.
- sleeping in a bedroom that gets the least exposure to sunlight.



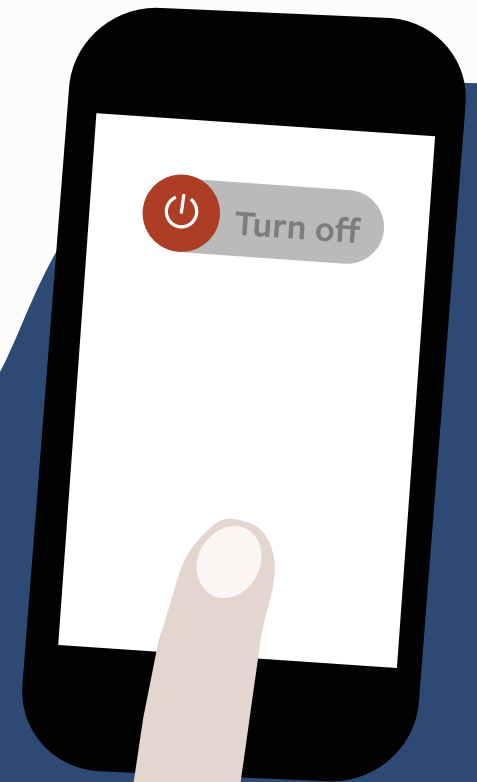
# Preparing for sleep after a night shift

You may also consider putting a 'do not disturb' note on the front door explaining that you are a keyworker, working shifts, and that you should only be disturbed if the matter is urgent.

Put your phone on silent. Make sure to switch off alerts/notifications on your mobile phone before you try to sleep.

We know it may not be easy, but forcing yourself to take short, structured breaks every 2-3 hours and taking a walk or getting something to eat and drink will help you, and therefore others who you are there to help.

Unless you are on a rapidly rotating shift pattern it is probably best to avoid napping during the 'lunch break' of a night shift. Naps confuse the body clock and can make it harder to sleep well. In addition, if you nap regularly, you will probably suffer from 'sleep inertia' - the feeling of grogginess that people experience after being awoken from a short sleep. Studies have found that sleep inertia is particularly severe at 4am so it's best to avoid a nap at this time as it may actually reduce safety.

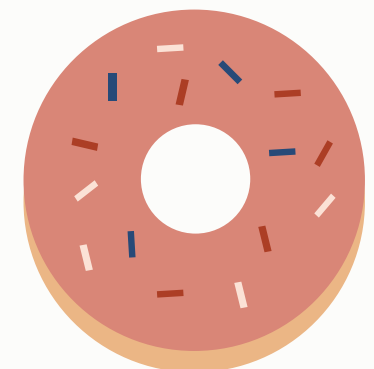
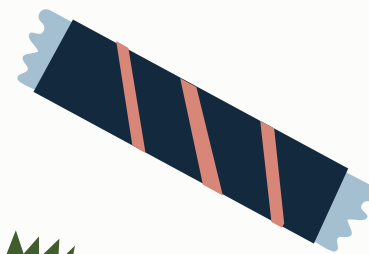
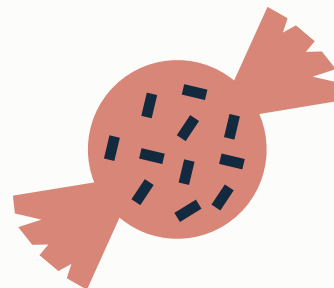
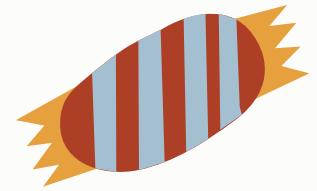


# How to make shift work more tolerable

It is easier to work shifts in your 20s and 30s because your sleep is more resilient the younger you are. Fast forward to your 40s and it becomes more difficult to cope with frequent changes to shift patterns. Fortunately, there are various techniques that can help you to maintain your physical, mental and emotional health when working shifts.

## Choose the right foods

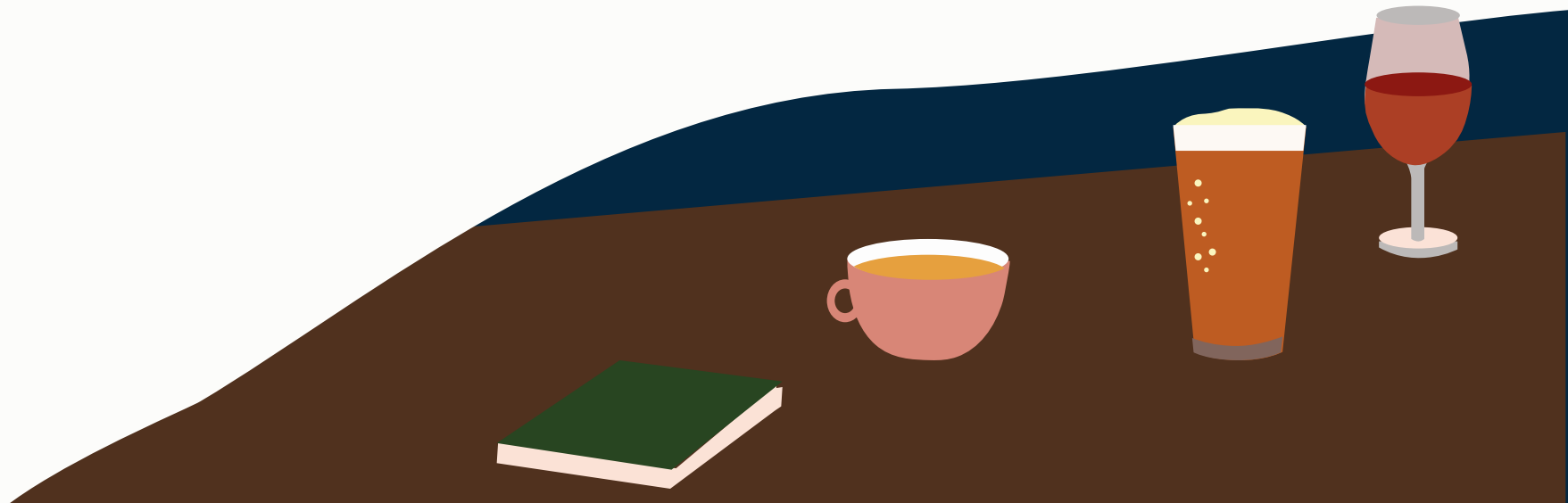
Poor sleep and shift work increase the desire for sugary and fatty foods. If your workplace doesn't offer healthy food, then plan to bring something nutritious with you to work to **resist the temptation to eat sweet and fatty foods.**



## Watch what you drink

Many shift workers rely on caffeinated drinks to stay awake and work efficiently during the night. However, this can make it more difficult to fall asleep once the shift has finished. To reduce the chances of this happening, **avoid caffeinated drinks at least five hours before your intended bedtime.**

Shift workers should also avoid drinking alcohol to 'help them get to sleep'. This is because getting to sleep is rarely the issue. **Alcohol will affect the quality of sleep** and make staying asleep less likely, compounding the common problems experienced by night workers.



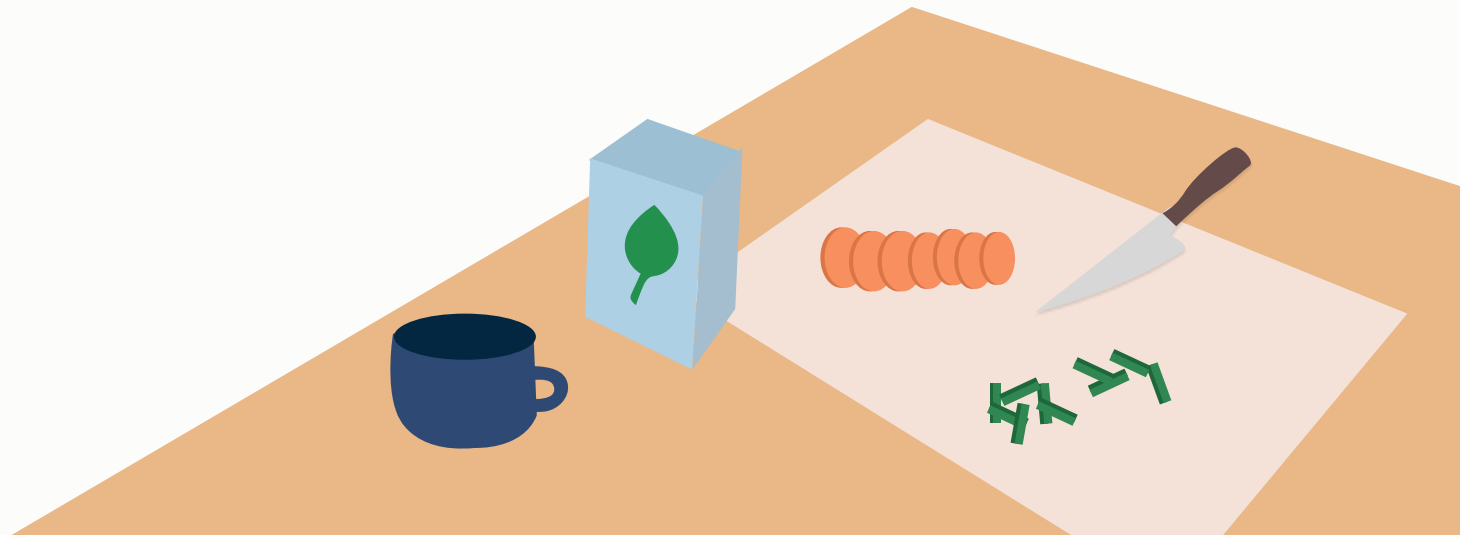


# Planning meals around shifts

When you work a standard 9 to 5 day, you usually wake up a couple of hours before the start of your shift. After you finish your day's work you come home and have dinner and then it is several hours before you go to sleep, during which time you should be relaxing and winding down before bed.

When you work rapidly rotating shifts, this sort of pattern is rarely possible. Following a night shift, the temptation is to eat dinner at breakfast time and then try to fall asleep almost immediately. It is hard enough to sleep during daylight hours, but the usual advice is to **avoid a large meal for 3-4 hours before bed** because the work involved in digesting a meal will disturb your sleep.

If you cannot, due to sleepiness, avoid going to bed immediately after a night shift then try to avoid eating a large sugary or fatty meal before sleep. Try sleeping once in the period immediately after your shift and then again before your next night shift - with a big meal in between.



# Transitioning between shifts

We're not going to lie, this is difficult. However, there are ways to manage this better:

- If you feel sleepy then go to sleep, whatever time this may be. There is no point trying to go to sleep if you are not sleepy. Equally, if you are sleepy then your body and brain want to sleep. **The critical thing is to listen to your body.**
- Don't expect to switch from night shift to a typical day. For the first day of your rest period you will need to get some sleep during the day. The more hours you try to switch at any one time, the harder it will be to adjust.
- When moving from a day to a night shift, it may be beneficial on the day before starting a block of nights to try and have a long period of sleep in the late afternoon or early evening.



# Napping and the body clock

A correctly set body clock is the most critical factor in ensuring good sleep and proper functioning during the day. Within the limits of what is possible, given work patterns and domestic routines, shift workers should try to be as regular in their sleeping patterns as possible.

Naps shouldn't be part of the shift worker's overall sleep strategy - they should be used as a 'last resort' to catch up on essential sleep. A short sleep may help in the afternoon or evening before a first night shift but, otherwise, it's best to plan for sleep so that you can avoid naps - if you possibly can.



# What to do if you're feeling anxious

Anxiety is part of everyday life. It warns of potential danger and, as a result, anxiety can often be beneficial. However, repeated and persistent anxiety, either real or imagined, can become a problem in terms of maintaining good physical, mental and emotional health.

Severe feelings of anxiety affect both our waking lives and our sleep. What's worse is that **poor sleep exacerbates feelings of anxiety**. It's a vicious cycle.

Anxiety causes sleeping problems as it places the mind on high alert. It is more difficult to fall asleep when your mind is racing. Anxiety can also be a problem if you wake during the night - or wake early - as it will make it harder for you to fall back asleep.

## Tell others how you're feeling

Don't be afraid of discussing your feelings with a close friend or relative along with **qualified professionals**. Anxiety can feel severe, but it is extremely treatable and discussing your feelings in this way can help immensely.

If your anxiety is severe and persistent and it is affecting your sleep and daily activities, please contact your GP. If it's only affecting your sleep let us know, we can help.



# Ways to manage anxiety directly

## Check the news less frequently

While it is crucial to be aware of the latest health advice to keep you and your loved ones safe, it has been reported that spending more than three hours each day focusing on stressful situations is linked to:

- Increased anxiety
- Heightened feelings of depression
- Worse sleep quality

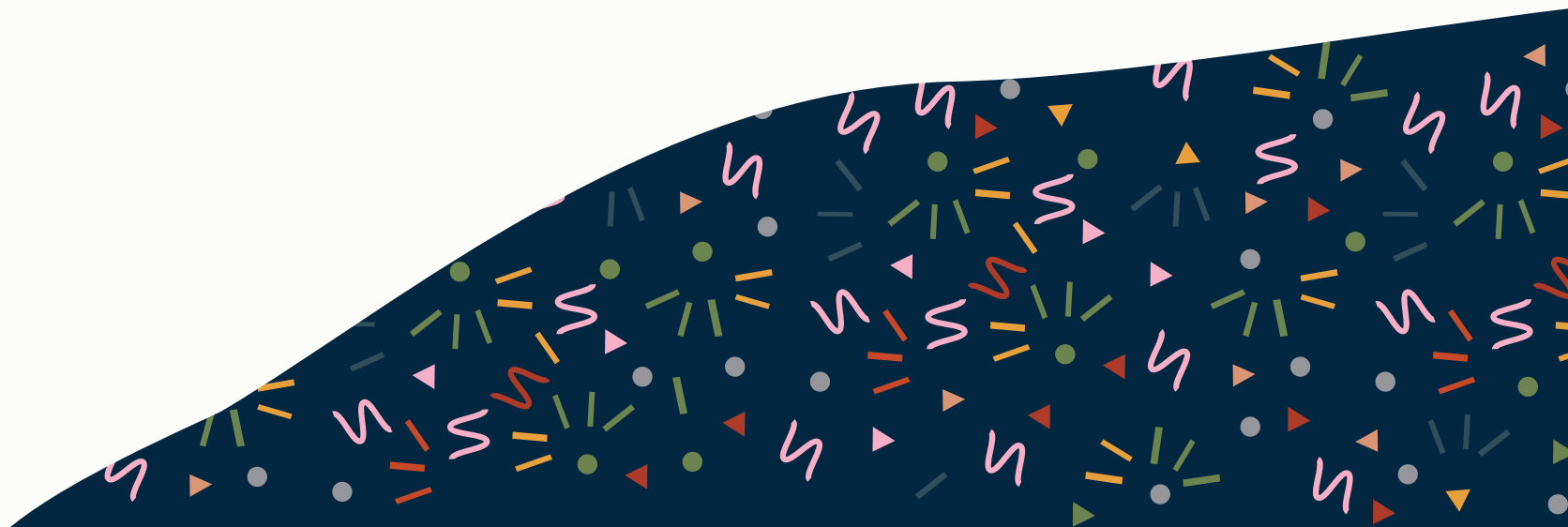
**To reduce the likelihood of experiencing any of the symptoms listed above, we'd recommend that you currently:**

- Limit the time you spend watching news.
- Check the news no more than twice a day.



You can sign up for email alerts from the UK Government without having to check news outlets regularly, which can exacerbate the problem. If you register for these alerts you will be **notified when the situation changes, without having to check news.**

*When* you check for information also matters. If done too close to your normal bedtime, there's a risk of becoming psychologically aroused, experiencing poorer sleep and a worsening of anxiety.



# Avoid rumours

Social media is a great way to keep in touch with loved ones, especially for those who are practising social distancing or are in self-isolation. However, many of us will be aware that not all news is accurate and some news can be fake. **COVID-19 news is no exception.**

If something has appeared in your feed that seems worrying, you might want to fact check it to reassure yourself. You can do this using a variety of websites, such as:

- [hoaxorfact.com](https://hoaxorfact.com)
- [factcheck.org](https://factcheck.org)
- [snopes.com](https://snopes.com)

# Wind down properly before bed

Go to bed when you are sleepy and not when the TV programme you are watching finishes. Our preparation for sleep often involves nothing more than turning the TV off, having a pee, brushing our teeth and then getting into bed. We expect to fall asleep and we're constantly surprised when that does not happen.

One of the most important things you can do is to establish a regular and relaxing bedtime routine. This will signal to the body that it is time for sleep and will allow you to put the stresses and worries of the day behind you.

You should spend at least 30 minutes winding down before bed. Once you are in bed, because you are relaxed, you should gently drift off to sleep. You mustn't try to fall asleep: the harder you try, the more worked up you will get because you aren't falling asleep.

- Give yourself at least 30 minutes to wind down before bed
- Only get into bed when you're properly sleepy
- Don't try to force yourself to sleep - it won't work



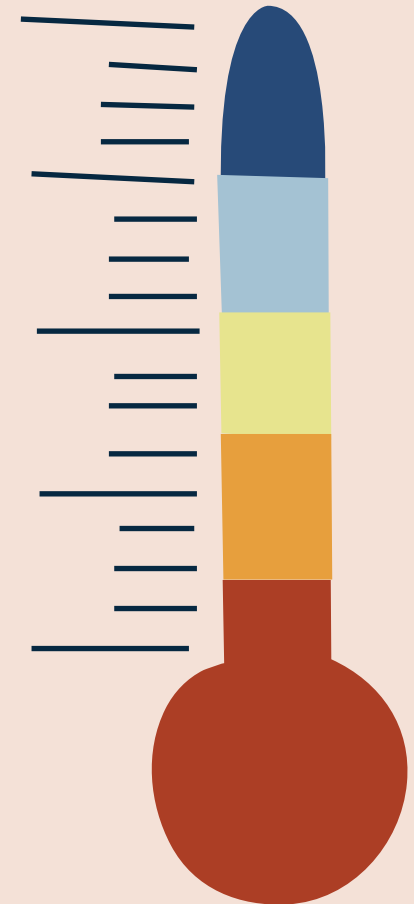


# The bedroom

The bedroom should be a sanctuary reserved for sleep and the sleep environment needs to be pleasant and relaxing (get rid of the TV and computers, etc.). It should also be dark (either use heavy curtains or eyeshades) and it should be as quiet as possible (if this is difficult then consider using easily available earplugs which are comfortable to sleep in).

The bedroom should not be stuffy - fresh air is good for sleep - and it should be neither too hot nor too cold. Many experts say that the ideal temperature for the bedroom is 16-18°C (60-65°F), although this is, again, a matter of personal preference.

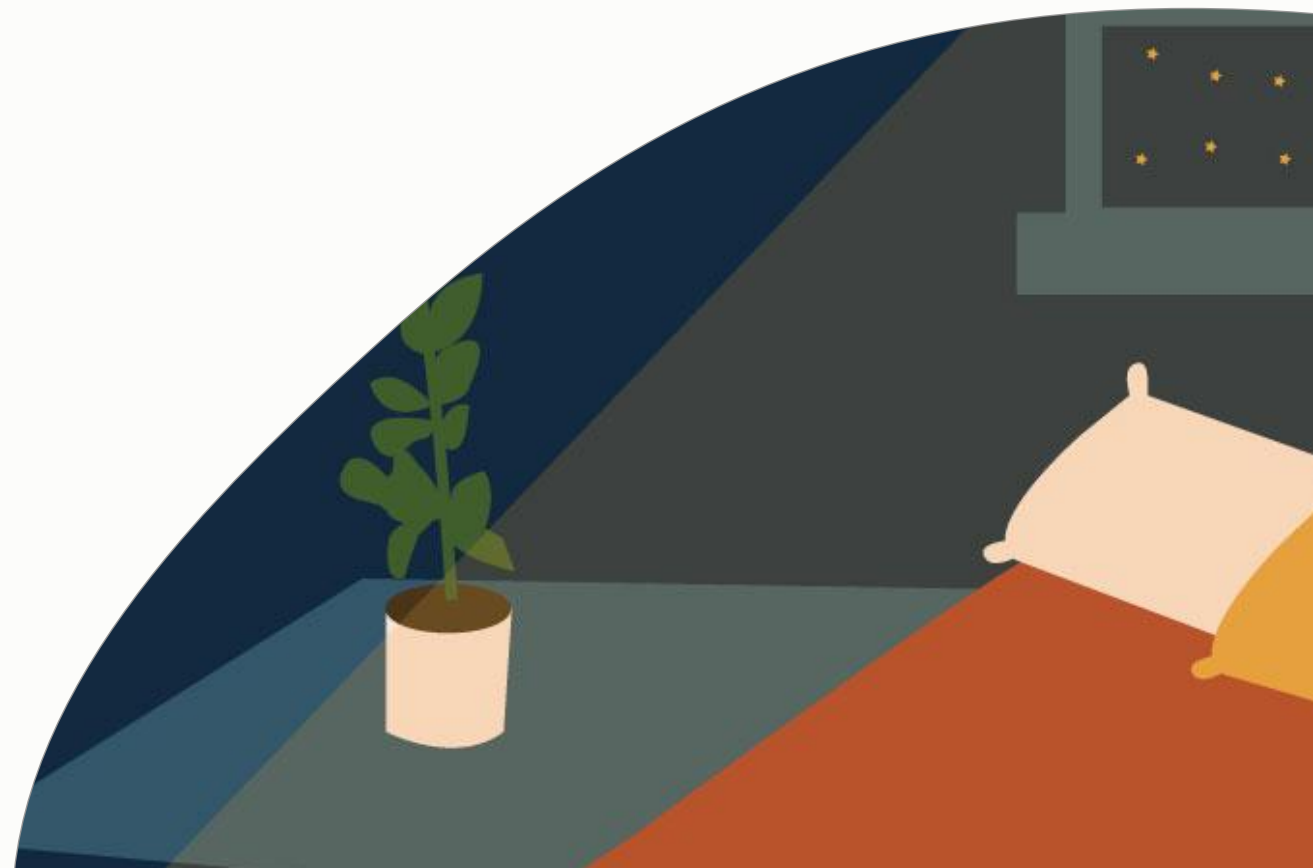
However, it is not just the room temperature that is important for getting a good night's sleep. The temperature in your direct sleeping environment, i.e. under the duvet, is equally important. This temperature should be close to a thermo-neutral temperature (approx. 29°C) as possible.



During the night the body needs to lose heat and this is achieved mainly through the head and face - the only bits that usually stick out from under the duvet. A cool bedroom facilitates this heat loss. However, if the room is too hot or you are too hot under the duvet, it is more difficult for the body to lose heat and this will cause disturbed sleep. The same is also true if you are too cold as this means the body has to work hard to maintain its optimal temperature.

Finally, the bed should be very comfortable and as big as you can fit into your bedroom.

- Go to bed to sleep
- Avoid doing daytime activities in the bedroom
- Save the bed for sleep and intimacy only



You can't find sleep, so try not  
to chase it.

You have to let sleep find you,  
and it will.



# References

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