

Parasomias:

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How much sleep do older adults need?

Most adults need about 8 hours of sleep at night to feel fully alert when they're awake. This is usually true for people age 65 or older too. But as we get older, we might have more trouble sleeping. Many things can get in the way of sleeping well or sleeping long enough to be fully rested.

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What sleep changes are common in older adults?

Older adults might get sleepy earlier in the evening. Older adults may have trouble falling asleep when they go to bed at night. They might not stay asleep all night. They might wake up very early in the morning and not be able to go back to sleep. These problems can make older people very sleepy in the daytime.

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What causes sleep problems?

A number of things can cause sleep problems. By the time an adult is over 65 years old, his or her sleep-wake cycle doesn't seem to work as well. Some lifestyle habits (like drinking alcohol or caffeinated drinks, or smoking) can cause sleep problems. Sleep problems may be caused by illness, by pain that keeps a person from sleeping or by medicines that keep a person awake. People of all ages can have a sleep disorder such as sleep apnea, restless legs syndrome or periodic limb movement disorder.

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What is sleep apnea?

People with sleep apnea usually snore very loudly. Then they stop breathing for 10 to 30 seconds during sleep. They start breathing again with a gasp. This can happen hundreds of times in a night. Every time this happens it causes the person to wake up a little bit. Sleep apnea can cause daytime sleepiness. It can also make high blood pressure and heart disease worse.

If you have sleep apnea and are overweight, it might help to lose weight. It will also help to sleep on your side, and to stop drinking alcohol or using sleep medicines. Many people with sleep apnea need to wear a nasal mask during the night to keep their airways open. The mask treatment is called "continuous positive airway pressure," or CPAP. It helps you breathe normally during sleep. Surgery can help some people with sleep apnea.

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What is restless legs syndrome?

This is a "creepy-crawly" feeling, mostly in the legs. It makes you want to move your legs or even walk around. It may be worse in the evenings when your legs are at rest. It usually happens every night and may start after you get in bed. This feeling may keep you from falling asleep. Older adults are more likely to have this problem.

If you have restless legs syndrome, placing hot or cold packs on your legs or taking a hot or cold bath might help to reduce your symptoms. Some people find relaxation techniques helpful. You can also try massaging your legs, feet and toes before going to bed. Certain medicines may help people who have restless legs syndrome. Your doctor will decide if using medicine is the right treatment for you.

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What is periodic limb movement disorder?

A person with this disorder kicks one or both legs many times during sleep. Often the person doesn't even know about the kicking unless a bed partner talks about it. It can get in the way of good sleep and cause daytime sleepiness. Some people with restless legs syndrome also have periodic limb movements during sleep. Medicine may help both of these problems.

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What can I do to sleep better?

- Try to go to bed and get up at the same time every day.
- Try not to take naps longer than about 20 minutes.
- Don't have caffeinated drinks after lunch.
- Don't drink alcohol in the evening. It might help you fall asleep, but it will probably make you wake up in the middle of the night.
- Don't lie in bed for a long time trying to go to sleep. After 30 minutes of trying to sleep, get up and do something quiet for a while, like reading or listening to quiet music. Then try again to fall asleep in bed.
- Ask your doctor if any of your medicines could be keeping you awake at night.
- Ask your doctor for help if pain or other health problems keep you awake.
- Try a little exercise every day. Exercise helps many older adults sleep better.