



Are you getting enough sleep? The link between ADHD and poor sleep.

By Dr Tony Lloyd



Many people with ADHD of all ages say that poor sleep is very closely linked to their ADHD. A recent study into sleep and ADHD reported that as many as 67% of the respondents in the study group said that they found it hard to get a good night's sleep. They stated that as they started to feel tired, their ADHD symptoms would worsen, thereby making it more difficult for them to sleep well.

It is recommended that children aged between 3-5 years old should be getting between 10- 13 hours of sleep per day. This reduces slightly for children between 6- 12 years old to between 9-12 hours. It is recommended that teenagers get between 8-10 hours per night and adults up to the age of 60, 7 plus hours per night. So how are you or your children doing? Are you getting enough sleep?

If your answer is no, what could be causing this? People with ADHD often have very hyperactive minds, have poor attentional regulation and are highly distractible. Even when lying in bed, it can then be difficult to quiet the mind and relax enough to sleep. For people on ADHD medications, the stimulant nature of these medications can make people feel more awake AND make sleeping harder.

ADHD is a highly comorbid condition and people can experience significant mental health or substance misuse issues. Both of which can make falling and staying asleep more challenging. Indeed, ADHD has been linked to a range of sleep disorders and sleep is often explored between patient and clinician as part of the diagnostic process for ADHD. One example is, Circadian-rhythm sleep disorder. Throughout every twenty-four period, your body will make changes to adjust to the amount of light and darkness. In

some cases, a body may not be in tune with this cycle. Consequently, the body does not release melatonin which is the hormone which triggers the brain that it is time to sleep.



Another example is Sleep apnea. People with sleep apnea stop and start breathing throughout the night. It is estimated that up to 25% of people with ADHD have sleep apnea. It results in intermittent waking and feeling tired generally but particularly in the morning. Restless legs syndrome is another sleep disorder associated with ADHD. Research puts the incidence as high as 44% with people reporting that they experience throbbing, aching or itching feelings within their legs.

However, there are a number of strategies that people with ADHD can use to improve the quality of their sleep. These are often referred to a “good sleep hygiene.” In extreme cases, people should consult their clinician. It could be that a change in medication or being prescribed melatonin is what is needed. Other ideas include; being more active and outdoors more during the daytime hours, getting regular exercise, avoiding caffeine four hours before bedtime, ensuring that your bed is as comfortable as possible and limiting the amount of distraction in the bedroom. Common distractions can be that the bedroom is either too hot or too cold, not dark enough or if there are screens in the bedroom from televisions, tablets or mobile phones.

A calming and relaxing bedtime routine is recommended, with the same time to go to bed each day, including weekends as well as avoiding napping from four hours before the time to go to bed.

If the quality and duration of sleep improves this will have a significant effect on overall functioning and ADHD symptomology. A good night’s sleep improves concentration, cognition and productivity. It can contribute to improved academic performance for children and young people. Studies have linked good sleep as a principal strategy for reducing obesity being associated with a reduced consumption of calories during the day. It has been suggested that poor sleep can affect the body’s ability to regulate food intake correctly. For people interested in sport and exercise, good sleep is said to improve performance. The body heals during sleep; therefore, successful sleep can lead to a person having more energy, being faster, better coordination and more acute mental functioning. We know that regular exercise is an important self- management strategy for people with ADHD and it is clear how good sleep would contribute to that.

Finally, there are, of course, general health benefits to a good night’s sleep, in that, it reduces the incidence of inflammatory bowel diseases, builds the immune system’s ability to fight off infections and lowers blood pressure which lowers the risk of heart disease. To conclude, sleep is a vital component to good health and wellbeing. It enables the body to repair and be fit and ready for the following day. Sleep can be seriously affected by the symptomology of ADHD but there are ways that we can combat this and improve the quality of our sleep overall.