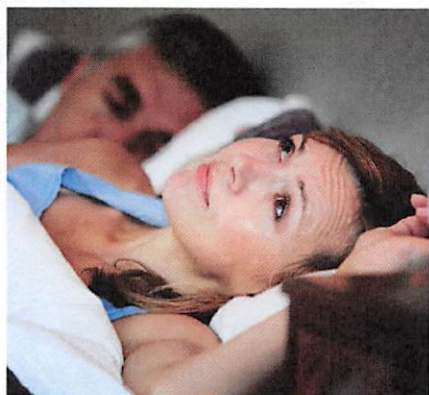


# Why Older Adults Don't Get the Sleep They Need

By Dr. David Westerman, Medical Director of Northside Hospital Sleep Disorders Center



Getting a restful night sleep can become a nightmare, especially as we age. One big misconception is that as we age, the amount of sleep we need decreases.

The truth is adults need seven to eight hours of sleep per night. This is harder to attain as adults become seniors.

With age, sleep becomes lighter and deep sleep (known as delta sleep) may be entirely absent by the age of 80 (earlier in some patients).

Sleep is often fragmented, especially in retirees, who nap during the day and sleep less at night. Certain medications can also interfere with sleep as well as forced changes in lifestyle or worrisome medical conditions.

Nighttime sleep may also be interrupted by physical complaints such as arthritis, noise, heart disease, reflux, hot flashes (in women) and urges to urinate.

Fragmented sleep leads to unrefreshing sleep and a sense that one has slept less. Other sleep disruptors include:

**Insomnia** may be more frequent in the elderly, where nighttime disturbances are followed by difficulty in returning to sleep.

**Sleep Apnea**, where pauses in breathing occur during sleep, is a sleep disorder seen with greater frequency in older adults.

**Restless Leg Syndrome** is another disorder that could keep people up at night. Symptoms include creepy-crawly or irritable feelings in the feet and legs particularly in the evening while relaxing and watching television, for example.

**Rapid Eye Movement Sleep Behavior Disorder (RBD)** is a condition where subjects retaliate in response to a disturbing dream and may injure themselves or their bed partner. Patients with Parkinson's sometimes have RBD.

**Dementia and Alzheimer's disease** may be a major cause of sleep disturbance that sometimes causes agitation and confusion.

**Advanced Sleep Phase Syndrome (ASPS)** is when the circadian rhythm or body clock is adjusted, so the preferred sleep time is moved earlier and earlier.

There is a treatment for most sleep disorders. If you or a family member feel unrefreshed or fatigued during the day, it's important to discuss this with your doctor or a sleep specialist.

In all cases, it is important to practice good sleep hygiene.

## PROMOTE GOOD QUALITY SLEEP

- Keep regular sleep habits
- Develop a period of relaxation or "downtime" before bedtime
- Go to bed only when sleepy
- Exercise regularly, but not close to bedtime
- Maintain a healthy diet and avoid eating close to bedtime
- Minimize napping, especially in the evening
- Avoid caffeine, nicotine and alcohol before bedtime
- Create an environment conducive to sleep (cool, dark and quiet)
- Use your bed for sleeping and intimacy only (no TV, checking social media, emailing)

*Dr. David Westerman is medical director at the Northside Hospital Sleep Disorders Center in Atlanta. The Northside Center is accredited by the American Academy of Sleep Medicine. Call (404) 303-1700 to schedule a consultation with a board certified sleep specialist or please visit [www.northside.com/sleep](http://www.northside.com/sleep) for additional information.*

