

If you
cannot
sleep



Many refugees have periods when they experience difficulties sleeping. Some have this every night, others just occasionally. Problems include difficulties in falling asleep, persistent broken sleep, waking early or recurring nightmares.

Sleep difficulties are often connected with your current life situation, your thoughts and your experiences. Stressful experiences from the past may return night after night in the form of nightmares. Sleep can also be affected by other problems in life, and poor sleep can lead to things feeling very difficult during the day. You should contact a doctor if you have trouble sleeping over a long period of time. Your doctor can investigate whether these difficulties are due to illness or whether they are connected to your life situation.

In this brochure you will find useful advice about what you can do to improve your, whatever the cause of your current sleep problems.

Tips for sleeping better



Importance of a regular daily rhythm

Many factors in the lives of refugees can lead to their having an irregular daily rhythm. Refugees living at asylum reception centres find that many people are up a large part of the night. It is easy to be affected by this, and to do the same. It is also easier to sleep in if you have nothing to do during the day, but this results in you being awake later in the evening and at night. Try to turn around your daily rhythm so that it resembles the rhythm you had when you did not have trouble sleeping. This might mean getting up early even if you do not have anything special to do - and going to bed at a more normal time. Your body needs time to adjust to new routines, so it may take some time before you are sleeping better.



Do the same thing every evening before you go to bed

Regular habits help your body to function well. After a while, fixed routines will help you to fall asleep more easily.



Use your body during the day

Physical activity is often an effective way of improving sleep. Even 15 minutes of exercise per day means that your body is more relaxed when it is time to sleep. You could take a brisk walk before you go to bed, for example, although you should allow at least 30 minutes between exercise/physical activity and going to bed. This allows your body time to wind down. Good sex is also excellent to sleep better.



Avoid caffeine

Caffeine is a substance that makes your body more awake and more restless. There is caffeine in coffee, black tea (not herbal teas), chocolate and coke. If you have trouble sleeping, it is a good idea to avoid caffeine, especially towards evening and at night.



Get up if you have not fallen asleep within 30 minutes

Try not to force yourself to fall asleep. The more you force yourself, the more difficult it can be to fall asleep. If you cannot manage to fall asleep within 30 minutes – get up again. Go into another room and sit there quietly or do something quiet and non-stimulating until you feel that you are getting tired again. If you still cannot fall asleep after a further 30 minutes, get up again. Do this as many times as required until you manage to fall asleep.



Visualize a peaceful place

Lie down with your eyes closed and imagine that you are in your favourite place - a peaceful and restful place. This can be in your hometown, in your family home or on a sunny beach. Wherever it is, imagine that you are really there. You can look at your surroundings, listen to the peaceful sounds, smell the flowers, feel the warmth of the sun or any other sensation you would in the place you have chosen. Just relax and enjoy - and slide into sleep. Once you have discovered a place that is peaceful and which works, you will find that the more often you use it to fall asleep, the easier it will become.

Nightmares

Nightmares are often closely connected to things you have experienced or to pressures in your current life situation. Many people find that they have fewer nightmares if they talk to someone they trust about their nightmares, and tell them what they are about. You can also process the contents of a nightmare by thinking through it, and inventing a positive continuation of what your nightmare is about. You can also write down the nightmare with a more positive continuation.

Sleeping pills

Your doctor can give advice about the use of sleeping pills. In general, sleeping pills are used when there is an acute difficulty with sleeping, preferably for short periods only. Prolonged use may lead to dependency, and you may also need a higher dose to get an effect. Sleeping pills should therefore be used in consultation with a doctor. The type of sleeping pill and the dose required will be determined by the doctor according to a number of factors, such as your weight, general health and other illnesses, as well as and what kind of sleeping difficulties you have. Sleeping pills are tailored to the individual, so never swap pills with others or take more than the prescribed dose.



If nothing seems to help

Despite trying just about everything, some people may find their sleep problems do not improve. You should talk to your doctor about this. You may need a referral to a specialist for a more detailed investigation and analysis of your difficulties in sleeping. It may also be of some comfort to know that the difficulties in sleeping experienced by refugees are nearly always directly connected with their life situation. Most of them will find that their sleep patterns improve when their life situation changes.

Children also have difficulty sleeping

Children's sleep difficulties are often connected to the totality of their life situation. These difficulties may also be a reaction to problems in the family, or problems between their parents. If your child has trouble sleeping, talk to her/him about what s/he is thinking or dreaming about. Establish regular bedtime routines that make your child feel secure. Read a story or sing a lullaby. Contact a health centre or your doctor if your child has persistent difficulties with sleeping.

Forsideillustrasjon: Malin Falch



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