

# Ask The Experts



**Psychologist**  
**PENELOPE LEWIS**

Neuroscientist Penelope Lewis, author of *The Secret World of Sleep*, solves your sleep worries

**Q** I often study into the night for exams, but my mum tells me it's more beneficial for me to get a good night's sleep. Is she right? *Anna, Shoreham*

**A** Sleep boosts your memory in two ways. First, it's the one time when our brains aren't busy completing tasks or at least thinking about something specific, which makes it the ideal time for them to process the day's memories. It does this by actively replaying things that were experienced in the day. Secondly, memory replay can be intentionally triggered during sleep too, so your mum's right: it's important you get a solid night's sleep.

But studying in evening is not a bad idea, as new memories, in particular, are more likely to be replayed when you sleep. This means whatever you've revised just before you go to bed is replayed once you've closed your eyes.

To assist memory replay, you could inhale a distinctive scent, such as rose, while you study and again before you sleep. Research shows this can trigger your target memory to replay and strengthen. But we become immune to the effects of smells quickly, so use an air freshener to release the scent in 20-second bursts.

**Do you have a question for our experts? If so, email [talkback@topsante.co.uk](mailto:talkback@topsante.co.uk) or tweet us @TopSanteUK**



**Q** Whenever I have a stressful day planned, I have trouble sleeping the night before. I often wake up at 4am and can't get back to sleep. Can you help? *Celine, Carlisle*

**A** Most of us have woken up in the middle of the night before a busy day desperate to get back to sleep. And although we know that a good night's sleep is critical in order to feel good and function normally, we just can't get back to the Land of Nod. But instead of resigning yourself to spending the early hours staring at the ceiling, there are many things you can do to ensure you have a good night's sleep.

First of all, make sure your bedroom feels as comfortable as possible –

cool, quiet and not too brightly lit – as this will give your brain all the right signals that it's time to switch off.

You need to keep your bed associated with sleeping peacefully – and not lying awake stressed – so when you next wake up at 4am, get up. Once you're up, try a relaxing activity in another room that may help you dispel any worrying thoughts – such as reading – or, if you're particularly stressed about the next day, write everything down, including a plan for your day. Next, drink a glass of milk or eat a few

hazelnuts, which are both high in tryptophan. This helps the body produce niacin, which in turn helps to produce serotonin that can act as a calming agent in the brain and plays a key role in sleep. However, avoid caffeine and food containing the amino acid tyramine (such as peppers, smoked meats and fish), which is a sleep inhibitor.

If you are really feeling wide awake, a hot shower may help, too; it will not only relax you, but it will also temporarily raise your body temperature, creating a dramatic and effective cooling-down process when you get back into bed. This is a signal for your body to fall asleep. You could even try a jasmine or lavender shower gel for an added soporific effect.

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**Q** Every morning I hit the snooze button on my alarm clock multiple times before I can muster the energy to get up. Is this a bad habit to get into and is there anything I can do to help me feel ready to jump out of bed? *Steph, Durham*

**A** I fall into this 'snoozer' category, so I sympathise. Don't worry, it's normal for you to feel groggy when you first wake up and there's nothing wrong with pressing your snooze button first thing – it can often take a good 15 minutes to feel truly awake because you're in the stage of sleep inertia (halfway between asleep and awake).

However, even though it may be tempting to fall back to sleep, it's vital you don't, as you'll end up going back through this sleep inertia

stage several times. Force yourself to stay awake by turning on a bright light to kick-start your circadian clock and turn on the radio – your brain will gradually start to engage with your surroundings.

During the winter months, set your heating so it comes on half an hour before your alarm to help raise your body's temperature and prepare it to wake up. And for a little extra zing in the morning, try inhaling some mood-boosting peppermint or lemon scents so your ready to jump out of bed.

## 'How can I sleep better working shifts?'

**I'm a care worker who works shifts and often find it hard to get to sleep during the day when I'm on nights. Why is this and what can I do to ensure I get the sleep I need?** *Clemmie, Horsham*



You may be finding it hard to sleep in the day because of our circadian rhythm, which works on a 24-hour cycle. These rhythms are driven by a group of cells located in the hypothalamus of our brain, which are controlled by signals from nature, such as sunshine and nocturnal darkness. During this cycle, our body temperature and hormone production changes – at night, our temperature drops and our production of melatonin (the sleep hormone) increases. But when you're trying to sleep in the day, your circadian rhythm is in the wrong part of its cycle, so it's hard to drop off.

But there are solutions. First, you can even artificially reset your clock by taking melatonin supplements three hours before you intend to sleep. Also black out windows and stay away from your TV, phone and computer at least two hours before bed, as blue spectrum light can reset your circadian clock by breaking down melatonin. If you find it tough getting up in the dark, a sun lamp with a blue spectrum filter can reset your timings when natural light isn't available. Finally, try to group your night shift work into a minimum of a one-week stint, so your cycle has time to adjust before it has to change back again. ♦

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