

Sleep: a neglected public health issue

Controlled by circadian rhythms and sleep–wake homeostasis, sleep is a state of reduced mental and physical activity—a time for body and mind to recharge in preparation for the next day. Although adults aged 18 years and older are recommended to get 7–9 h of sleep per day (and children up to 12 h), the 24/7 economy, modern lifestyles, job stresses, and living environments adversely affect the timing, duration, and quality of sleep for many people.

On April 26, the Sleep Charity published the report *Dreaming of Change: A Manifesto for Sleep*, revealing the scale of sleep problems in the UK. Of 2000 adults surveyed, many reported current sleep problems (90%; two thirds of whom had experienced them for more than 6 years); workplace stresses causing sleep problems in the previous 6 months (75%), and sleep poverty (reduced sleep quality due to poor living conditions, uncomfortable beds and mattresses, and noise pollution; 30%), yet only 17% of those with symptoms of insomnia had received a diagnosis, and even fewer (5%) were aware that insufficient sleep is linked to the development of chronic diseases. Disparities in accessing treatment were also found. Of 132 NHS trusts that responded, only 17 (13%) offered the first-line treatment approved by NICE for short-term and long-term insomnia in the UK (cognitive behavioural therapy for insomnia [CBT-I]) in both digital and in-person formats. Although digital CBT-I can be accessed via the Sleepio app, the digital divide (those with and without internet access) in the UK means that many who could benefit from CBT-I are unable to do so. Concerningly, the report also found that by the end of 2022 prescriptions of sleeping drugs to children had increased three-fold over the past 7 years, suggesting a shift in demographic prevalence from what was once thought to be just a problem in adults. Based on the overall cost of prescriptions for sleeping pills alone, the authors of the report suggest that the total cost of treating sleep problems in the UK could exceed £100 million annually.

The effect of sleep problems on health and the economy cannot be overstated. In addition to cancer, chronic respiratory diseases, dementia, mental health conditions, and musculoskeletal disorders, insufficient sleep has also been linked to cardiometabolic diseases

and conditions, such as type 2 diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease, and metabolic syndrome. A recent UK Biobank study of 247 867 individuals followed up for a median of 12.5 years showed that individuals habitually sleeping 5 h per day (moderately short duration) had a 16% increased risk of being diagnosed with type 2 diabetes and those habitually sleeping 3–4 h per day (extremely short duration) had a 41% increased risk, compared with those sleeping the recommended 7–8 h per day. Insufficient sleep is also linked to increased all-cause mortality. A 2017 study by the research organisation RAND found a 13% higher mortality risk in individuals sleeping less than 6 h per night compared with those sleeping the recommended 7–9 h per night. Insufficient sleep also exerts a large toll on economies beyond immediate health-care costs. The RAND study forecast that, in 2025, up to US\$718 billion could be lost due to absenteeism and lost productivity resulting from insufficient sleep in five OECD countries (USA, UK, Japan, Germany, and Canada), representing between 1.4% and 3.2% of individual GDPs.

Sleep problems are obviously not just a UK-wide issue—they are universal, affecting all demographics. However, in contrast with public health campaigns promoting smoking cessation, healthy eating, and physical activity, messaging around the importance of getting sufficient sleep for optimal mental and physical wellbeing has been neglected. With so many people experiencing sleep problems (including an increasing number of children) and knock-on effects for education, jobs, health, and economies, sleep can no longer remain neglected as a public health issue. Tackling the sleep crisis is possible, but we must start young, instilling good sleep hygiene from an early age. It is imperative that new public health campaigns convey the importance of getting a good night's sleep; people with sleep problems must be supported and have access to approved treatments; and new treatments should be developed to expand options for those affected by these problems.

Sleep is too important a public health issue for it to remain hidden under the covers. Governments and policy makers need to recognise that sleep matters.

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For more on **sleep recommendations** see https://www.cdc.gov/sleep/about_sleep/how_much_sleep.html

For more on **The Sleep Charity** see <https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/>

For the report **Dreaming of Change: A Manifesto for Sleep** see <https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/get-involved/sleep-manifesto-2024/>

For the **Sleepio app** see <https://www.sleepio.com/sleepio/nhs/391#1/1>

For more on **sleep and cardiometabolic health** see **Comment** *Lancet Diabetes Endocrinol* 2023; **11**: 532–34

For more on **short sleep duration and type 2 diabetes in adults** see *JAMA Netw Open* 2024; **7**: e241147

For more on the **economic costs of insufficient sleep** see *Rand Health Q* 2017; **6**: 11