

Promoting Healthy Sleep for Older Adults: A Policy Statement from the National Sleep Foundation

Rationale: The National Sleep Foundation (NSF) has long supported the position that adequate, healthy sleep is essential for all age groups, including older adults, and that sleep health should be considered a crucial measure of overall health. Poor sleep can contribute to the risk of physical and mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety, neurodegenerative disease, obesity, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and stroke in older adults.¹ Poor sleep is also associated with impaired physical and cognitive functioning, more frequent falls, and overall poor quality of life, which may accelerate the aging process.² Based on this scientific evidence, NSF believes that sleep health (e.g., duration, regularity, continuity, and satisfaction/quality) is critical to overall health and functioning in all older adults.³

Background: Sleep is an important component for health and wellness across the lifespan. The number of people age 65 and older in the United States is steadily increasing and is expected to double over the next 25 years to about 72 million.⁴ By 2030, roughly 1 in 5 people in this country will be over the age of 65.^{5,6,7} The prevalence of reported sleep disturbances increases as the population ages, but poor sleep problems are not an inherent part of the aging process. The aging process increases the vulnerability for sleep disturbances, but does not cause them.⁸ Need for sleep does not decrease with age (NSF's recommendation for people 65 and older is 7-8 hours per night,⁹ similar to the recommendation for younger adults), but the ability to sleep can decrease due to biological, environmental, behavioral and psychosocial changes which place older adults at greater risk for sleeping difficulties.¹⁰ A National Sleep Foundation survey showed that 36% of people aged 65 and older without comorbid illnesses reported sleep problems; increasing to 52% among people with one to three comorbid conditions, and to 69% among people with 4 or more comorbid conditions.^{11,12} In spite of these challenges, getting older is not synonymous with poor sleep and optimizing sleep health as people age may help prevent or delay the onset of physical, cognitive, and mental disorders in older adults.¹³

Sleep Health Education: Understanding the connections between sleep and health helps motivate behavior change. In particular, older adults should be aware of the associations between sleep and brain and cardiometabolic health, as well as its role in the management of chronic pain. Sleep should be included in healthy living and disease messaging campaigns. Culturally sensitive messaging is important so content is accessible to historically disadvantaged groups, and should be developed in partnership with communities. Outreach to healthcare professionals about the importance of assessing sleep and promoting sleep health in older adults is also needed.¹⁴

Sleep Health Behaviors: Community support is important for sleep health behavior change in older adults. For example, community and peer-to-peer support has been used to enhance cognitive health and physical health among older adults.¹⁵ Local and national partners can help disseminate sleep health messaging and promote behavior change by enhancing community trust and helping to guide messaging and channels of communication.

Sleep Health Equity: Promoting sleep health equity is another important consideration for older adults. The older adult population in the US is becoming more diverse, and it is now estimated that nearly half of adults 65+ years old will be from minoritized racial/ethnic groups by 2060.¹⁶ Structural racism is believed to contribute to preventable disparities in poor sleep health and accelerates the aging process in socially disadvantaged older adults, through policies and practices that lead to differential access to health-promoting resources and greater exposure to health damaging events and conditions.^{17,18} It is fundamentally important to understand and work to address the range of environmental and social drivers of sleep health disparities among older adults to ensure more equitably distributed health promoting environments.¹⁹

Recommendations: Although general sleep health recommendations are applicable to older adults, the biological and environmental context of aging can make it more challenging for older adults to consistently follow recommendations that have been shown to result in improved sleep and benefits to health. Regularity of light exposure, physical activity, and consistency of meal times have all been identified as important routines during the day for optimizing the sleep-wake cycle and sleep health in older adults.^{20,21} These focus areas also are consistent with daytime recommendations currently made by the National Sleep Foundation for most adults as part of its Best Slept Self™ framework. Educational efforts should challenge the frequently held belief that people need less sleep as they age. NSF supports strategies, evidence-based policies and legislative action for older adults including those that:

1. Involve partners that work with older adults for dissemination of education and behavior change programs including healthcare professionals, national agencies and organizations, continuing care retirement communities, assisted living communities, federally qualified health centers, and local businesses
2. Modify environmental and social determinants of sleep health and make health-promoting environments more equitably distributed (e.g., increasing green spaces, safe spaces, and optimizing light levels in community areas)
3. Increase appropriations to relevant federal agencies to conduct research and deliver education about sleep health in older adults
4. Standardize daytime and nighttime lighting environments and procedures to align with circadian rhythm biology in all nursing homes, long-term care facilities, and other senior living settings
 - o The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), can establish clear policy guidelines on facility lighting levels or protocols in regard to resident and patient daytime activity
5. A report to Congress from HHS on sleep health and older populations detailing what divisions, including the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) and Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), detailing the actions that divisions can take to understand and address how inadequate sleep is affecting the health of older adults
6. Reauthorization of the Older Americans Act and evidence-based health promotion programs that focus on sleep health, including a review of data on the appropriate use of prescription, non-pharmacological, and other interventions to improve sleep health among older adults

Position: It is the position of the National Sleep Foundation that adequate sleep is critically important for healthy aging and, while sleep disturbance is common in older adults, it is not an inevitable part of the aging process. Medical, psychiatric, and psychosocial factors overshadow age as a risk factor for sleep disturbance and can be mitigated through education and the implementation of effective strategies and policy interventions that enable healthy sleep behaviors and environments for older adults.

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⁴ <https://www.prb.org/resources/fact-sheet-aging-in-the-united-states>

⁵ <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2018/cb18-41-population-projections.html>

⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The State of Aging and Health in America 2013. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; 2013.

⁷ <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2018/cb18-41-population-projections.html>

⁸ Vaz Fragoso CA, Gill TM. Sleep Complaints in Community-Living Older Persons: A Multifactorial Geriatric Syndrome. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society.* 2007;55(11):1853-1866.

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- ¹⁷ Global Council on Brain Health. *How to Sustain Brain Health Behaviors: Applying lessons of public health and science to drive change*. www.GlobalCouncilOnBrainHealth.org/2022
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- ²¹ Ancoli-Israel S, Gehrman P, Martin JL, et al. Increased light exposure consolidates sleep and strengthens circadian rhythms in severe Alzheimer's disease patients. *Behav Sleep Med*. 2003;1(1):22-36.