About this resource

This *Cognita Be Well Comments* resource draws upon several sources: a recent review of published research on sleep, commissioned by Cognita and conducted by Dr Dagmara Dimitriou of University College London (UCL); advice by the clinical psychologist Dr Bill Mitchell and the experience of Cognita's education and wellbeing team.

It is also informed by the insights of sleep scientist Dr Matthew Walker, author of *Why We Sleep,* in his series of videos for Cognita which are available on **www.cognita.com/cognita-be-well.**

Sleep during Covid-19

The nature of our sleep changes considerably throughout infancy, childhood, our teenage years and into adulthood, as shown in the National Sleep Foundation (US) diagram on the back page. However, its impact on our health and overall wellbeing, as well as our ability to learn and function effectively, remains a constant throughout our lives.

The Covid-19 Pandemic is an extreme and global crisis, which is hugely demanding on our physical and mental health. Now, more than ever, we should think about why and how sleep plays such a critical part in improving our health. However, it is first important to stress that it is *totally natural* to find sleep more challenging during this period. The reasons why can be divided into emotional responses and enforced lifestyle changes.

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Emotional responses:

1. Increased anxiety and worry due to health, economic or family concerns – the general uncertainty about so many aspects of our lives in the coming months only prolongs and intensifies such feelings.
2. Stress – this might be due to school or work pressures, changes or losses and relationship or family difficulties intensified in lockdown and/or due to social restrictions.
3. Low mood – being isolated from others and feeing helpless about not being able to be with or help those we love, is likely to exacerbate this state.

All these feelings impede sleep. They make it hard for the brain to switch off in the way necessary to promote our neurological and physical development, which in turn impacts our feelings, thoughts and behaviours as well as our overall cognitive and physical performance.

Lifestyle changes:

1. Screen Time – virtually all interaction (work and social) is now online; therefore, the brain is more stimulated by content and blue light. This light emitted from screens inhibits melatonin production, thus delaying sleepiness. The mere presence of devices in the bedroom can also raise anxiety levels, further hindering sleep, and create a temptation to check them during the night, and stay in bed later in the morning.
2. Disruption of daily routines – increased workloads push screen time later into the night, sometimes consuming more caffeine to keep going . This makes it more likely that we sleep later the next morning, unsettling our usual bedtime routine.
3. Restrictions on outdoor activity – fewer opportunities to get outside and benefit from natural sunlight disrupts the balance in our circadian rhythm.

All these changes impair the body's natural tools that help us get adequate sleep.

Why we must prioritise sleep during Covid-19

Sleep and Health

A lack of sleep can adversely affect emotional health and mood within just a few days.
If we have not slept properly, it is likely that we will feel more irritable with ourselves and those around us. Being in close, sometimes suffocating, quarters with our loved ones, and with our lifestyle restricting so many of the things that usually lift our mood, it is even more critical that we try to improve our sleep.

The emotional and behavioural symptoms of a lack of sleep are challenging to deal with – whether in ourselves or in our children. As such, it is easy to overlook sleep-deprivation as a contributory factor to those negative behaviours or emotions, but in Covid times, it is even more likely that there is a link between the two.

Poor sleep can also stimulate appetites for carbohydrate-rich foods, excessive amounts of which can lead to other health problems. Waking often in the night can increase the feeling of hunger, becoming part of a vicious cycle that drives obesity. If we consider this alongside the simultaneous challenge of keeping active in these times, then it is easy to see the damaging cumulative effect of insufficient sleep. We also know that a lack of sleep significantly impacts the immune system.

Sleep and Learning

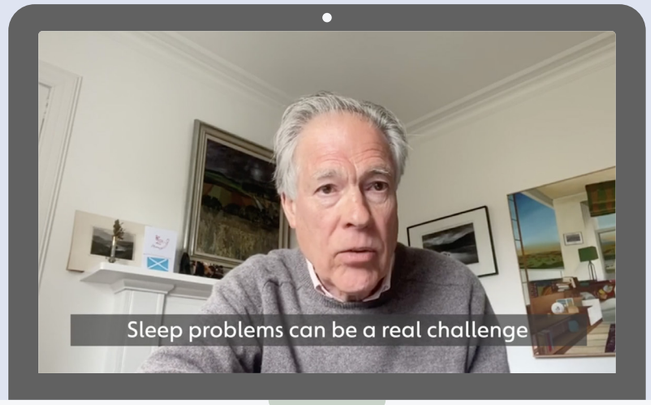
We all need sleep prior to learning in order to prepare the brain for soaking up new information and laying down new memory traces throughout the day. We also need sleep after learning in order to embed those new memories and to lay the groundwork for starting the process again the next day. Without sleep, the brain loses its capacity to make and create new memories, and its ability to process and retain information is inhibited.

At a time when there is tremendous pressure on children and young people to learn without the usual contact with their peers and schools, prioritising sleep in order to strengthen their capacity to remember would certainly be helpful.

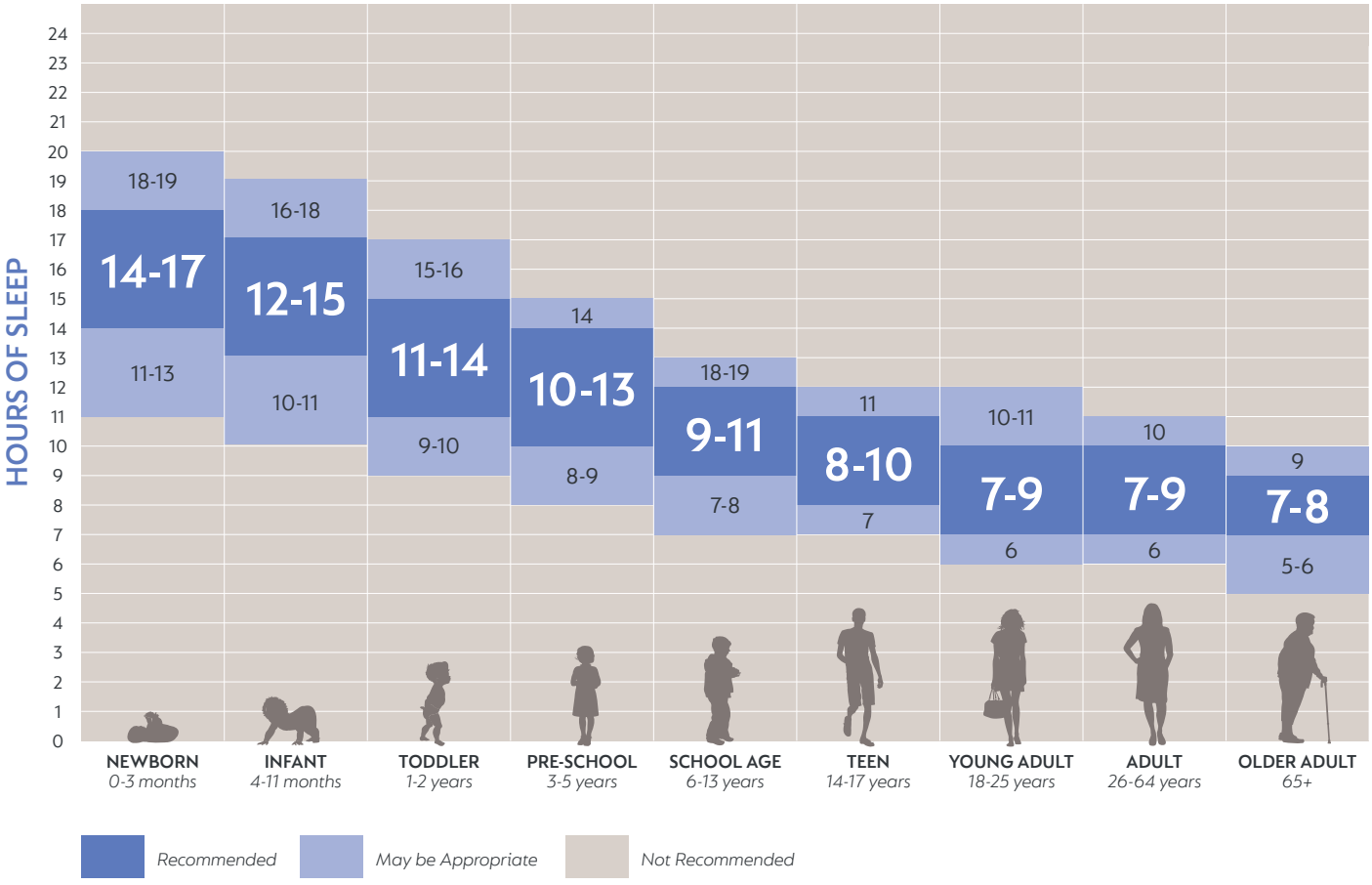
"There is no physiological system that we've been able to measure that isn't enhanced by sleep when you get it or demonstrably impaired when you don't get enough of it."

Dr Matthew Walker, author of *Why We Sleep*

Being awake when we need to be asleep can make us anxious, which in turns makes it even harder to get to sleep. In this short video, clinical psychologist Dr Bill Mitchell offers advice on how to settle yourself to sleep when this occurs. To view the video click here.



Sleep Duration Recommendations



Hirshkowitz M, The National Sleep Foundation's sleep time duration recommendations: methodology and results summary, Sleep Health (2015).

Top Tips

1. Regularity and routine are key in better preparing you and your children for restful and adequate sleep. This includes getting dressed for bed and for the day and using bed for sleep – not for work.
2. Never allow tablets, laptops or mobile phones in the bedroom in the hour before bed and while your child is sleeping.
3. Avoid sleeping in late or taking naps during the day to prevent disrupting your natural sleep cycle.
4. Gradually dim the lights towards bedtime and keep the bedroom dark through the night.
5. Keep the bedroom temperature around 18°C.
6. Get as much fresh air and daylight during the day as you can (especially in the morning) to work in harmony with your natural circadian rhythm. Being active outdoors enhances sleep (ideally not within 2 hours of bedtime).
7. Avoid caffeine after midday, and certainly in the late afternoon and evening – caffeine stays in your system for 12 hours and disrupts melatonin production (the chemical that helps us sleep).
8. Avoid over-consumption of social media or news about Covid-19 – especially before bed. Instead try to focus on one or two things for which you feel grateful or positive.

For more Be Well resources for families, including on issues related to Covid-19, visit **cognita.com/cognita-be-well.**