

How the COVID-19 Crisis is Changing Sleep: Implications for Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

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If your sleep has changed since the COVID-19 pandemic began, you are not alone! People from around the world have shifted to later bedtimes and waketimes^{1,2} and reported higher rates of sleep disturbances, ranging from 42% in Italy³ to as high as 74% in France.⁴ Sleep disturbances have been prominent in women and university students⁵ and for people who are in COVID-19 “hotspots”.^{6,7} With such high rates of sleep difficulties, it is not surprising that the use of sleeping pills (which are not generally recommended as a first step to managing sleep problems) have also increased.^{4,8} While more flexibility in work and school schedules during confinement at home may allow some individuals to get more sleep during the workweek,^{9,10} longer sleep times may not mean better sleep quality¹. Even when there is no pandemic, nearly 1 in 6 adults have reported poor sleep quality.¹¹

What might these changes mean for people with ADHD?

Before the emergence of COVID-19, it was well known that people with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) experience a range of sleep disorders.¹² In addition to experiencing high rates of sleep problems, adults with ADHD may commonly have undiagnosed sleep disorders, take longer to fall asleep, and are more likely to be “night owls”.¹³ While no research on sleep has been conducted exclusively with adults with ADHD during the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers have found that adults who have pre-existing mental health diagnosis (including ADHD) may have greater risk of poorer sleep quality during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁴ In children with ADHD, researchers have found that “eveningness” or being more of a “night owl” was associated with sleep problems and worsening of ADHD symptoms.¹⁵

How can we promote and protect sleep during COVID-19?

It may be especially important for people with ADHD to protect their sleep during the COVID-19 pandemic. For individuals with ADHD, guidelines for ADHD management during the COVID-19

pandemic recommend improving sleep habits as a first step for managing sleep problems.¹⁶ Sleep habits include when, where, and how you fall asleep. If your bedtime is creeping later into the evening and you are having trouble sleeping, you may want to work on keeping a regular sleep schedule. This means you stick to certain times for bedtime and waketime. A relaxing bedtime routine with dimmed lights and no electronics or screens is another healthy sleep habit that you could implement. Another important healthy sleep habit is to make sure your bedroom is optimized, which includes reducing excess light and noise, making your bed as comfortable as possible, and having the temperature cool but comfortable.

Healthy daytime habits can also improve sleep. This includes regular exposure to daylight (especially in the morning), reducing caffeine and alcohol intake in the afternoon and evening, and using relaxation techniques when stressed. Eating well and physical activity are also important. Confinement at home due to COVID-19 may reduce healthy eating and physical activity habits¹⁷ and many Canadians are getting less physical activity during the pandemic, especially those who were not active to begin with.¹⁸ Making time to be physically active is a great way to improve both your mood and sleep. According to Canada's 24-hour activity guidelines,¹⁹ adults should aim for several hours of light activity (walking and standing) every day. These guidelines also recommend adults accumulate 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity per week and do muscle strengthening activities at least twice per week.

Emerging research on COVID-19 and sleep suggests that having high levels of belonging, social trust and participation, as well as social support can reduce the risk of poor sleep during periods of self-isolation.^{20,21} For this reason, it may be helpful to stay socially connected with others if you or others are self-isolating. For more information on ADHD and COVID-19, visit the resource section at CAADAC.

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