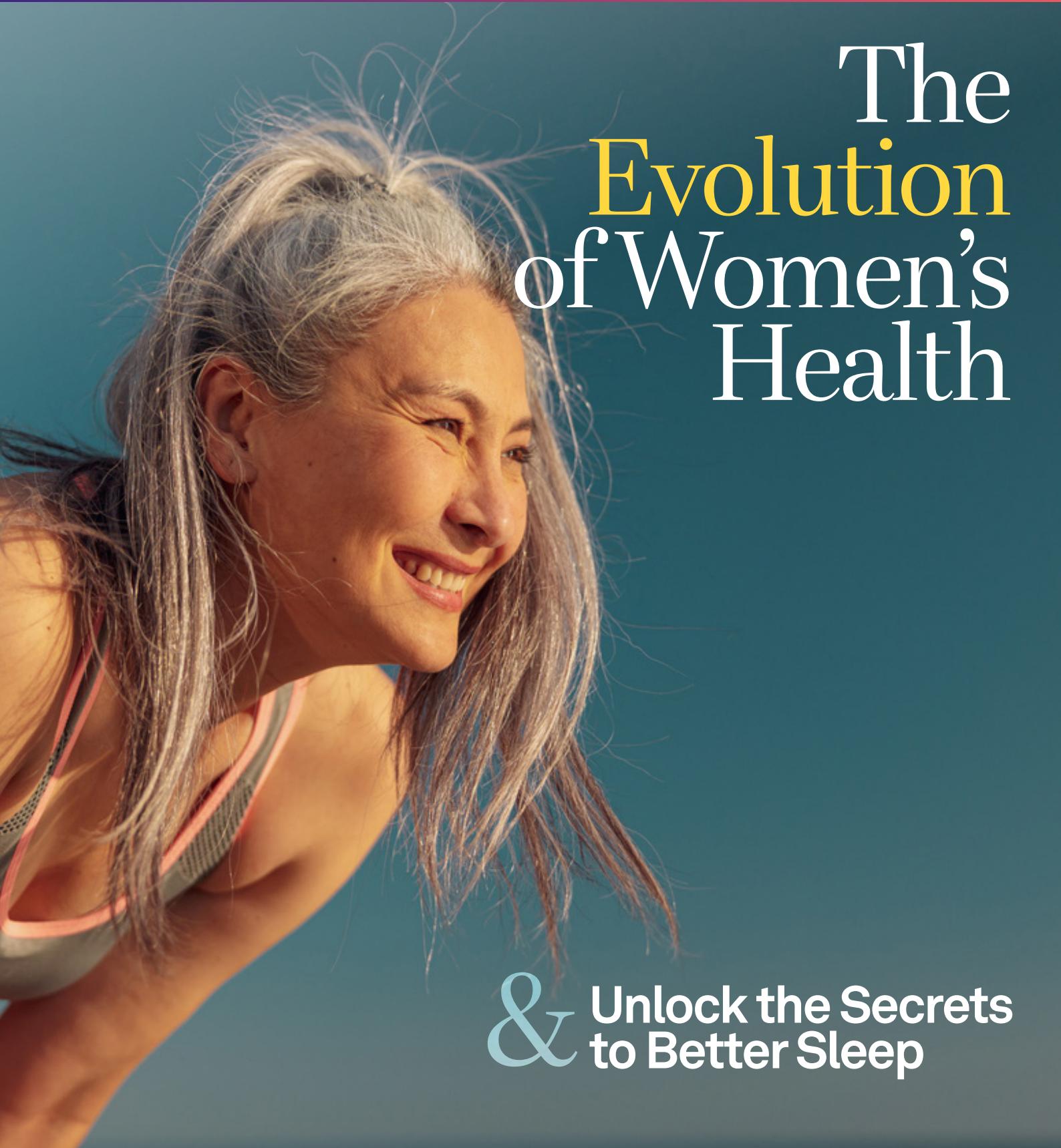




MARCH 2026 NEWSLETTER

A woman with long, light-colored hair, smiling and looking to the side, set against a teal background.

The Evolution of Women's Health

& **Unlock the Secrets
to Better Sleep**

The Evolution of Women's Health



Women's health has typically been an overlooked, marginalised and misunderstood area of medicine historically. The field has seen remarkable strides over centuries thanks to improved understanding and the efforts of scientists, healthcare professionals and women's health advocates. However, there remains much work to be done to ensure that women worldwide receive equitable and comprehensive care. As we celebrate Women's History Month, let's look at the pivotal historical achievements in women's health and the road ahead.

A Look Back

The history of women's health in the UK has seen remarkable medical advancements and pioneering efforts that have shaped the care women receive today. These milestones not only revolutionised healthcare but also empowered women to take greater control of their bodies and wellbeing. From the establishment of obstetrics and gynaecology as a specialised field to groundbreaking achievements in reproductive health and cancer care, these developments have had a lasting impact on the health and lives of women across the UK.

THE BIRTH OF MODERN OBSTETRICS AND GYNAECOLOGY

The foundation of modern obstetrics and gynaecology can be traced to the 19th century, when advancements in surgical techniques and a greater understanding of anatomy began to shape women's healthcare. In 1847, Sir James Young Simpson, a Scottish Physician, introduced the use of chloroform as an anaesthetic during childbirth, a revolutionary step that made labour less painful and paved the way for safer obstetric procedures. While the practice faced resistance at the time, including from religious groups, Queen Victoria's use of chloroform during the birth of her eighth child in 1853 helped popularise its acceptance in maternity care.

Modern obstetrics and gynaecology practice in the UK ensures that women have access to safe and supportive care during pregnancy, childbirth and beyond. The establishment of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RCOG) in 1929 marked a significant step in formalising training and ensuring high standards of care in women's health.

THE INTRODUCTION OF THE NHS AND ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE

The establishment of the National Health Service (NHS) in 1948 was a landmark moment for women's health in the UK. Before the NHS, access to healthcare was often dependent on financial means, leaving many women unable to afford medical treatment. The creation of the NHS meant that healthcare became free at the point of use, giving women access to essential services such as maternity care, and later to contraception and cancer screening.

Today, women also benefit from access to evidence-based health education material via NHS resources. This means women are better informed about their bodies and their health choices.

THE PILL AND REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM

One of the most significant medical advances in women's health was the introduction of the contraceptive pill in 1961. Initially available only to married women in the UK, it became accessible to all women following the landmark NHS Family Planning Act of 1967. The pill gave women unprecedented control over their reproductive health, enabling them to make choices about their lives on their own terms, in line with their cultural and religious beliefs.

The introduction of long-acting reversible contraceptives (LARCs), such as the intrauterine device (IUD) and contraceptive implant, has further expanded options for women who wish to manage their fertility. These methods are now widely available through the NHS and remain some of the most effective forms of birth control.



ADVANCES IN MATERNAL HEALTHCARE

The 20th century saw dramatic improvements in maternal healthcare in the UK. A major turning point was the introduction of systematic antenatal care, with early introduction dating back to the 1920s. This included regular check-ups during pregnancy, which allowed for the early detection and, later, successful management of potentially life-threatening complications such as pre-eclampsia and gestational diabetes.

Ian Donald was the first obstetrician to introduce the use of ultrasound in the UK in the 1950's. This later transformed the way pregnancies were monitored. Ultrasound scans quickly became a routine part of antenatal care, enabling doctors to track foetal development, detect abnormalities and plan for any necessary interventions. Today, the UK has one of the lowest maternal mortality rates in the world, thanks to ongoing improvements in obstetric care.

PIONEERING CANCER SCREENINGS

The UK remains at the forefront of research and innovation for cancer prevention, detection and treatment in women. The Pap smear test, introduced in the 1960s, has significantly reduced cervical cancer deaths through early detection and treatment. A national HPV vaccination programme was launched in the UK in 2008, in the hope of eliminating vaccine-preventable cervical cancer.

Similarly, advancements in breast cancer detection and treatment have had a profound impact on women's health. Mammograms, which allow for the early identification of breast cancer, became widely available in the late 1980s through the NHS Breast Screening Programme. It is thought to save around 1,300 lives each year in the UK. Combined with ongoing research into targeted therapies and improved surgical techniques, breast cancer survival rates in the UK have nearly doubled over the last 50 years.



BREAKTHROUGHS IN FERTILITY TREATMENTS

The UK has been a global leader in fertility research and treatments. One of the most significant medical breakthroughs occurred in 1978, when Louise Brown, the world's first baby conceived via in vitro fertilisation (IVF), was born in Oldham, Greater Manchester.

Today, the NHS provides access to IVF treatments for eligible individuals, and private clinics offer a range of options for those seeking assistance with conception. Fertility preservation techniques, such as egg freezing, have become more accessible, with NHS provision available for medical indications such as cancer treatment, and private options enabling women to preserve their fertility by choice.

TACKLING MENOPAUSE

The development of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) in the mid-20th century provided a means to manage menopause symptoms such as hot flushes, night sweats and mood swings. Continued research on large groups of women has helped to dispel myths about the safety of HRT and well-informed use has improved quality of life for millions of women.

The NHS now provides comprehensive menopause guidance and access to treatment, and there is increasing recognition of the need for workplaces to accommodate women during menopause and peri menopause. For example, some organisations are already introducing menopause policies to support employees, demonstrating increasing awareness of the effects of menopause in the workplace, ahead of menopause action plans becoming mandatory for large employers from 2027.

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A Brighter Future for Women's Health

As we look to the future, there are many reasons to feel optimistic about the continued advancements in this field. From ground-breaking research to increased awareness and global efforts to promote equity, the road ahead promises opportunities to improve women's lives.

► Advancements in Research and Technology

Medical research is entering an exciting era, with new technologies enabling more precise and personalised care. Scientists are increasingly investigating use of artificial intelligence (AI) to improve early detection of diseases like breast and ovarian cancer, while advances in genetic testing are paving the way for personalised and targeted treatments. These innovations hold the potential to revolutionise how we prevent, diagnose and treat conditions that disproportionately affect women.

► Tackling Long-Overlooked Conditions

Understanding of conditions like endometriosis and the impact of transition to menopause is improving with increased investment, growing public awareness and appropriate advocacy. For example, the Women's Health Strategy for England, launched in 2022, focuses on improving women's health across the life course and addressing any inequalities in care provision, including for underrepresented groups.

► Breaking Down Barriers to Access

With telemedicine and digital health solutions on the rise, women in remote or underserved areas can now receive consultations and prescription advice from the comfort of their homes. There is also a growing focus on addressing social and cultural health inequalities, ensuring that services are inclusive and accessible to women from all backgrounds and communities.



THE ROLE OF ADVOCACY AND EDUCATION

Advocacy and education have always been powerful forces driving progress in women's health, and their importance will only grow in the years to come. By raising awareness and equipping women with the knowledge they need to make informed decisions, we can continue to break down barriers and ensure better health outcomes.

Advocacy plays a vital role in pushing for systemic change. In recent years, we've seen the power of campaigns and public movements in challenging outdated practices and demanding greater investment in women's health. In the UK, the introduction of the Women's Health Strategy for England is a direct result of voices being raised to highlight the gender health gap. Advocacy also ensures that underrepresented groups – such as women of colour, LGBTQ+ women, and those with disabilities – are included in healthcare reforms.

Education is equally critical in empowering women to take control of their health. By providing access to reliable information, we can help women make informed decisions about their bodies, understand their health needs and seek timely care when required. Comprehensive health education in schools is helping to normalise discussions around menstruation, contraception and mental health, giving younger generations the tools to navigate their health with confidence. Digital platforms and online communities are also playing a key role in making health information more accessible, breaking down barriers and connecting women with support networks.

Your Guide to Rest and Rejuvenation



Sleep can be the first thing we sacrifice to meet the demands of busy schedules. But quality sleep is one of the most important pillars of good health, alongside nutrition, physical health and mental health. During sleep, the body repairs itself, the immune system is strengthened, hormones are regulated, and the brain processes and consolidates information.

It's important to understand what good sleep entails. It's not just the quantity that matters but also the quality. Good sleep means falling asleep within a reasonable time frame, staying asleep throughout the night and cycling through the various sleep stages, including rapid eye movement (REM) sleep.

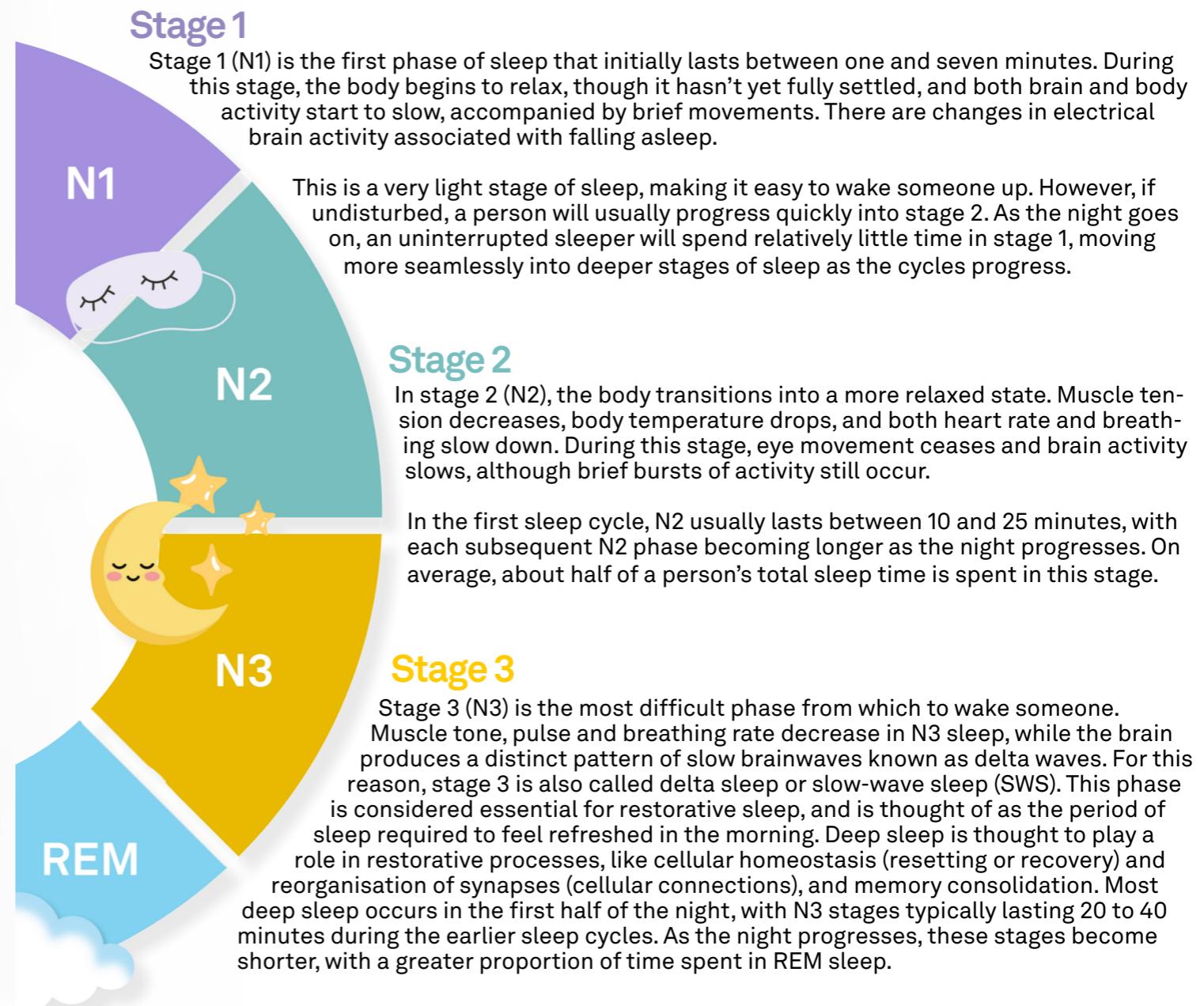
If you're one of the many people struggling to get the rest you need, this guide will help you understand what quality sleep entails and how you can achieve it.

Stages of Sleep



Sleep is divided into four distinct phases: one dedicated to rapid eye movement (REM) sleep and three that make up non-REM (NREM) sleep. The deeper the stage of NREM sleep, the more difficult it becomes to wake someone. Over the course of a typical night, an individual will experience four to six sleep cycles. While the duration of each cycle can vary, they last around 90 minutes by the end of the sleep episode.

The length and structure of sleep cycles can differ from person to person and even from night to night, influenced by factors such as age, recent sleep habits and alcohol intake.



Stage 4

Stage 4 (REM) is characterised by a surge in brain activity, reaching levels similar to those experienced when awake. Despite being closed, the eyes move rapidly from side to side beneath the eyelids, giving this stage its name. Breathing becomes fast and irregular and heart rate and blood pressure increase to near-waking levels.

REM sleep is considered important for emotional processing and memory consolidation. It is also the stage where the most vivid and intense dreams occur, in line with brain activity and physical changes paradoxically combining features of wakefulness and sleep. While dreaming can happen during any sleep stage, it is less frequent and less vivid during the NREM phases. During this stage, the body undergoes atonia – a temporary paralysis of most muscles – except for the eyes and the muscles responsible for breathing. This helps to prevent us acting out our dreams.

Typically, REM sleep begins about 90 minutes after you fall asleep. As the night progresses, REM stages become longer, with the first stage lasting only a few minutes and later stages extending up to an hour. In total, REM sleep accounts for approximately 25% of an adult's overall sleep time.

WAKING UP MID SLEEP CYCLE

How you feel upon waking is closely tied to the stage of sleep you were interrupted from, rather than the overall length or quality of your sleep. This is why waking up naturally, often at the end of a sleep cycle, tends to feel refreshing and pleasant.

Waking up mid-sleep cycle can leave you feeling groggy, tired and disorientated, known as sleep inertia. This often occurs when you are woken by an alarm or other disturbance. Sleep inertia is most intense when you are woken from the deepest stages of sleep, as your body and brain are furthest from wakeful activity at this point. The greater the difference in sleep state from consciousness when you're woken, the stronger the desire to return to sleep.

If you find yourself waking mid-sleep cycle, it's helpful to allow yourself 10-15 minutes for the effects of sleep inertia to fade and your body and mind to transition to a more wakeful state before assessing how well you actually slept.

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Potential Impacts of Lack of Sleep

Insufficient sleep can adversely affect both our physical and emotional wellbeing. Beyond fatigue and lethargy, poor sleep disrupts daily hormone regulation, which can impact the way the body handles sugar. It is more difficult to make healthy food and lifestyle choices, opting for high-calorie, low-nutrition foods, leading to weight gain. You may also become more susceptible to minor infections or inflammation, as sleep-related hormones are understood to influence the functioning of our white blood cells and immune system.

Poor sleep increases the risk of certain health conditions. For example, it is associated with increased risk of high blood pressure, heart disease and stroke, likely due to the influence on regulatory nervous systems, the stickiness of small blood vessels and impact on inflammation and metabolism mentioned above. Some evidence has also linked long term suboptimal sleep to an increased risk of Alzheimer's disease and there may be a link to some cancers.

Sleep deprivation can reduce emotional resilience, contributing to mood swings and influencing social interactions, including misinterpreting others' expressions as negative. It also affects cognitive function, impairing concentration, memory, decision-making, reaction time and problem-solving abilities. Lack of sleep can heighten our perception of stress, reducing our ability to cope effectively with challenges.

Good sleep enhances our memory, our ability to learn, our creativity and our ability to solve problems. It impacts on our overall productivity and safety – insufficient sleep is strongly associated with an increased risk of accidents and mistakes at work.



Sleep Enhancing Methods

With a few practical changes to your daily habits and bedtime routine, you can create the ideal conditions for more restful and rejuvenating sleep. Here are some tried-and-tested methods to help you drift off and stay asleep:

- ▶ **Consistent sleep schedule:** Go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.
- ▶ **Bedroom environment:** Keep your bedroom quiet, dark and cool. The temperature should be no more than 18 degrees Celsius.
- ▶ **Pre-sleep routine:** Develop a pre-sleep routine that helps signal to your body that it's time to wind down, like reading a book or taking a warm bath.
- ▶ **Mindfulness and relaxation techniques:** Practices like meditation and progressive muscle relaxation can reduce stress and promote sleep and help to create separation for your mind from alertness towards sleepiness.
- ▶ **Limit screen time:** The blue light from screens can interfere with the production of melatonin, the hormone that promotes sleep. Try to avoid screens at least an hour before bedtime. Reading is much more relaxing for the brain.
- ▶ **Diet and exercise:** Regular physical activity and a balanced diet can improve sleep quality. Avoid heavy meals and alcohol close to bedtime. The half-life of caffeine is different for individuals but is around five hours on average. This means it takes five hours for caffeine levels to drop by half once consumed. If you are having difficulty sleeping, try cutting out caffeine after midday.
- ▶ **Write down your thoughts:** If you often struggle to fall asleep because you feel you are ruminating over worries or events of the day, consider a journal or other way of writing these down.

By adopting sleep-friendly habits and creating a calming bedtime routine, you can transform the way you rest. Small, consistent changes can have a big impact over time. Whether it's embracing a set sleep schedule, limiting screen time or creating a peaceful sleep environment, every step you take brings you closer to more restorative sleep. Remember, everyone struggles with sleep from time to time, but practising good sleep hygiene will help to restore regular rest.



Resources

- ▶ [James Young Simpson | Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh](#)
- ▶ [O&G pre-20th century and foundation of the College | RCOG](#)
- ▶ [A history of the pill | Health | The Guardian](#)
- ▶ [Professor Ian Donald, pioneer of Ultrasonography in Obstetrics and Gynaecology](#)
- ▶ [Major NHS update brings menopause into routine health checks - GOV.UK](#)
- ▶ [Global health advocacy | RCOG](#)
- ▶ [Stages of Sleep: What Happens in a Normal Sleep Cycle?](#)
- ▶ [5 Stages of Sleep: Psychology, Cycle & Sequence](#)
- ▶ [Sleep cycles: what happens at each stage & what it means | Boots](#)
- ▶ [Stages of sleep | Trouble Sleeping](#)
- ▶ [What is Sleep and Why is it Important? | Health Partners Group](#)
- ▶ [The Art of Good Sleep | Health Partners Group](#)

Our Services

In this issue we talk about women's health and the importance of sleep. At Health Partners we deliver a broad spectrum of health services for our clients workers, from menopause training and support for those suffering from symptoms to health checks, lifestyle coaching and mental health support.

Find out more about our full range of services and how businesses can harness them, on our website: www.healthpartnersgroup.com



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*Healthy Easter &
Spring Cleaning for Wellbeing*