



# Why it's vital to start a conversation about sleep

The pharmacist and members of the pharmacy team are ideally positioned to identify people who would benefit from sleep advice and guidance. In this article, sleep expert Dr Neil Stanley discusses how to confidently start patient conversations about sleep health, how to inform people of the benefits of good sleep, and the OTC sleep aids to safely recommend in pharmacy.



Figure 1: Common signs of the effects of lack of sleep on mental wellbeing



The importance of sleep can't be emphasised enough. Sleep is crucial to mental, physical and indeed emotional health. Sleep is about balance and homeostasis, and is as vital to life as eating and drinking, so we need to make it an important part of our life. Research shows that poor sleep has detrimental effects on many aspects of health – both physical and mental – so we neglect it at our peril.

In an online survey among Irish adults conducted in 2019, consumers ranked getting enough sleep as their number one priority in maintaining good health and wellness, yet the majority claim to be getting less hours' sleep than what they perceive to be 'healthy'. Stress, physical pain and money problems are three of the main reasons why people struggle to sleep in Ireland.

Lack of sleep can lead to psychological distress and put us at an increased risk of developing depression and anxiety. Good quality sleep on the other hand – like a healthy diet and exercise, can improve our mental health and wellbeing.

### Poor sleep doesn't have to be a fact of life

With 6 in 10 adults in Ireland having difficulties in getting, or staying asleep at night, that represents a large portion of people coming into pharmacy, and in reality everyone could benefit from good sleep guidance.

Patients may present in several different ways that could indicate they may need advice on sleep. Look out for patients who:

- Look tired, with bags or dark circles under their eyes, or keep yawning;

- Ask for products that will give them an energy boost;
- Talk about feeling worried or stressed out;
- Mention having trouble concentrating/ remembering things they need to; and
- Seem to be feeling down, anxious or low.

For any of these patients, you can simply start a conversation about sleep using a simple tool such as a survey: 'We're doing a survey this week about how everyone is sleeping. Have you got a minute to answer a couple of simple questions?'

Perrigo has developed a simple survey tool, 'Sleepy Heads', which takes the form of a quick and simple questionnaire to help pharmacists and pharmacy assistants identify and advise patients who may be

currently experiencing poor sleep.

### Tried and tested methodology

This training programme was trialled by independent pharmacy Warman-Freed in the UK, to ensure that both the method and messaging recommended resonated with pharmacy staff and patients alike. The survey is based on three short, simple questions:

- Do you struggle to fall asleep at night?
- Do you wake at night and can't get back to sleep?
- Is lack of sleep making it difficult to concentrate?

The resulting advice could play out in a number of different scenarios, such as those illustrated here.

## Advice to give customer when:

### They struggle to sleep at night:



1

#### DO

- ✓ Go to bed at the same time every night
- ✓ Your bedtime routine in the same order
- ✓ Keep a sleep diary to record what is troubling you
- ✓ Consider: making it darker in the room / wearing a sleep mask / using earplugs / changing bedding / nightclothes / changing pillow/mattress

#### DON'T

- ✗ Look at a screen before bedtime, as this emits light that can keep you awake
- ✗ Eat a meal late in the evening, as this can lead to heartburn / indigestion



**ADVISE CUSTOMERS** that as well as the advice given above, there are OTC sleep aids that may help.

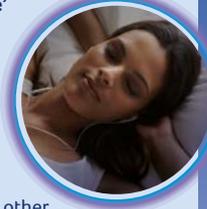
### They wake in the middle of the night and can't get back to sleep:



2

#### DO

- ✓ Practise breathing exercises to relax you – these can easily be found online
- ✓ Listen to 'white noise' or other sounds like the sound of the sea. There are many apps designed specifically for this



#### DON'T

- ✗ Check your phone or other devices for messages or news as this may make you feel even more alert

**ADVISE CUSTOMERS** that as well as the advice given above, there are OTC sleep aids that may help.

### Lack of sleep makes it difficult to concentrate during the day:



3

As we saw earlier in this booklet, feeling low or anxious can lead to sleeplessness and lack of sleep can lead to low mood / anxiety. So it's vital to try and break this vicious cycle:

#### DO

- ✓ Exercise: a walk at lunchtime, walking to / from work – park further away, get off a stop earlier...



#### DON'T

- ✗ Exercise close to bedtime – it can make you feel alert and energized
- ✗ Have caffeine, sugary foods or energy drinks in the afternoon / evening

**ADVISE CUSTOMERS** that as well as the advice given above, there are OTC sleep aids that may help.

## Explain how pharmacy-only OTC sleep aids may be able to help

Sleep problems usually get better by changing your sleeping habits, but when everyday coping mechanisms and non-pharmacological strategies have not worked, OTC sleep aids can help get the sleep pattern back on track.

OTC sleep aids contain a commonly used antihistamine, such

as diphenhydramine hydrochloride, that blocks the normal actions of histamine, the chemical that stimulates arousal-promoting areas of the brain. This helps reduce alertness and promote that first drowsy stage of sleep, and so helps with drifting off into a restful deeper sleep.

## Treatment options

To understand your patient's sleep problem, it's helpful to establish the length of their sleep problem.

### One to two weeks:

Pharmacy advice: At this phase, usually the person is not presenting at pharmacy and doesn't recognise they have a 'sleeping problem' but marginalise it due to lifestyle impact, e.g. time of high stress, bereavement etc. They are using coping mechanisms such as hot drink, reading a book, relaxation techniques etc.

### Up to four weeks:

Role of pharmacy: This phase of temporary sleep disturbance is where the role of pharmacy comes into play and over-the-counter sleep aids may be of benefit.

### Over one month:

Role of GP: If the problem moves into this phase, then the patient should be referred to the GP, who will be able to advise on other options available such as prescription sleep aids or cognitive behavioural therapy, which is a talking therapy that can help the patient manage their problems by changing the way they think and behave.

*Dr Neil Stanley is a sleep expert and author of How to Sleep Well: The Science of Sleeping Smarter, Living Better and Being Productive.*

## Good sleep guidance

Good sleep guidance which combines a quiet mind with a relaxed body and a sleep friendly environment can help your patient get a better night's sleep. It's also important to note that everyone should find their own individual way to sleep.

1. **Routine** – try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day.
2. **Wind down** – relax at least one hour before bed, for example, take a bath or read a book.
3. **Get Comfortable** – make sure your mattress, pillows and covers are comfortable.
4. **Get your steps in early** – exercise regularly during the day but avoid exercising at least four hours before bed.
5. **When you're ready** – only go to bed when you feel sleepy.

