



# SLEEP HEALTH FOR EMERGENCY PERSONNEL

- Sleep is likely to be shorter and of inferior quality during emergency events that last for many days or longer
- Inadequate sleep will impact your ability to perform tasks well
- Plan for sleep where you can – naps too
- Knowing the signs of sleepiness and fatigue is important to keep you safe
- There are things you can do to help you wind down when you do get the chance to sleep

Note: All words that are underlined relate to topics in the Sleep Health Foundation Information Library at [www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au](http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au)

**This fact sheet is for emergency personnel responding to a range of situations over an extended period of time.** This may include responding to health pandemics or epidemics, bushfire situations or disasters like cyclones. Emergency personnel may prioritise responding to incidents over sleep, especially when the emergency is impacting their own community.

Long hours, night shifts and consecutive work periods mean good sleep is not always possible. Over consecutive days or weeks of inadequate sleep, sleep debt will build up (see also [Shiftwork](#)).

While we can operate for some time on inadequate sleep, we don't perform tasks as accurately or as quickly, we can't concentrate as well, our communication skills deteriorate, and we make more mistakes (see also [Memory, Thinking and Sleep](#)). When we are extremely sleep deprived, we may fall asleep with almost no warning. This occurs particularly with less than 6-7 hours of sleep per day. Our physical and mental health may also be impacted by inadequate sleep over an extended period.

For emergency personnel, direct exposure to the threat, as well as indirect exposure to trauma of loss of life and/or property may also make sleep difficult. Sleep deprivation makes everyone react more emotionally to events.

As an emergency responder, there are some things you can do to maximise your chances of getting good sleep when you have the chance.

## Take your chances to sleep

- Sign off for a night to give yourself the best chance at a good sleep. We sleep best at night when our sleep is lined up with our rhythms of temperature and melatonin. Getting a good night's sleep will mean you are better prepared to face the next day.
- Sleep when you can. While night time sleep is the best, during extended emergency events, taking the chance to nap when you can will help with your performance and alertness. Short naps won't sustain you for an extended period but will keep you going for a bit. If you can get a couple of hours, do it. The afternoon siesta period will usually provide the best catch-up nap (see also [Napping](#)).
- Plan ahead for sleep if you can, even if it's a short one. Working with your team members, you might be able to take it in turns napping.
- Encourage your team members to take a break and get some sleep. Sometimes we don't want to leave team mates 'in the lurch' so knowing they will be okay lets us sleep easier.
- When there is opportunity for a few nights of sleep at the end of an incident, or the situation improves for a few days, take the chance for a long sleep (or two). Sleeping as much as your body 'wants' is the best way to recover from extended periods of inadequate sleep.



For other popular helps visit us online at

[www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au](http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au)

## Know the signs

- Know your own signs of fatigue and sleepiness and take action if you notice them. Yawning, heavy eyelids and rubbing your eyes, struggling to concentrate, or making little mistakes, might all be signs that you are fatigued and at risk of an accident. Taking a break, a ten minute nap, caffeine (coffee, tea or cola) and changing tasks can provide temporary relief, but plan a longer nap or sleep.
- Keep an eye on your team members. If you have worked emergencies with them before you might know how they get when they are tired so look out for the signs. Sometimes people's mood changes when they are tired so increased irritability might be an important sign.

## Switching off

- Handing over to the next team can be a really good strategy to help you switch off prior to going to sleep. Making sure that all the information you have that is important to your team mates or leader is passed on will help you wind down. Make notes if that helps you get everything out.
- Debrief with other team members if that helps you work through what happened during the shift and not replay things while trying to sleep.
- Take the time to learn how to relax so you can do this if you can't sleep. An App called 'Smiling Mind' has helpful short mindfulness activities to help you relax. Another option is *Progressive Muscle Relaxation*, which helps relax both the body and the mind. Learn this via Youtube during the day and then replay the technique in your mind at night in bed.
- Do not lie in bed awake for a long time. If you are mulling things over or feeling hyper-aroused get up and go and sit in a quiet, dark room. Calm your thoughts until you feel sleepy or more relaxed again then return to bed.
- If you experience trouble sleeping due to rumination over the emergency for long enough to concern you, it's important to seek some help. Your agency's EAP provider, or your GP will be able to provide some guidance.

## Keep good sleep habits

- Keep your sleep-wake routine normal where possible and have short naps if needed.
- Be conscious of your caffeine intake as it can interfere with sleep quality. While you may use it to boost alertness during shifts, it is best to avoid caffeine for a few hours prior to sleep (see also [Good Sleep Habits](#) and [Caffeine and Sleep](#)).
- If your sleep disturbance continues well beyond the period of the emergency threat seek further information and medical advice.

## More information

- [Insomnia](#)  
[www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/insomnia-2.html](http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/insomnia-2.html)
- [Shiftwork](#)  
[www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/shiftwork.html](http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/shiftwork.html)
- [Drowsy driving](#)  
[www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/drowsy-driving.html](http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/drowsy-driving.html)
- [Fatigue as an occupational hazard](#)  
[www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/fatigue-as-an-occupational-hazard.html](http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/fatigue-as-an-occupational-hazard.html)
- [Coronavirus, stress and sleep](#)  
[www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/getting-good-sleep-during-the-covid-19-pandemic.html](http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au/getting-good-sleep-during-the-covid-19-pandemic.html)

## If you need help

Whether you feel distressed through anticipating a possible emergency or actually recovering from a trauma or loss there are resources to help.

In a mental health crisis, call:

- Lifeline 13 11 14
- MensLine Australia 1300 78 99 78
- Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467
- Kids Helpline 1800 55 1800

For information on over 70 different sleep related topics, written by professionals, visit the Sleep Health Foundation Information Library at [www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au](http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au). The underlined topics in this article are covered in detail there.



## Sleep Health Foundation

114/30 Campbell Street, Blacktown NSW 2148  
T: +61 (0) 2 8814 8655 F: +61 (0) 2 9672 3884



[www.facebook.com/SleepHealthFoundation](https://www.facebook.com/SleepHealthFoundation)

This information is produced by:

**Sleep Health Foundation** ABN 91 138 737 854

[www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au](http://www.sleephealthfoundation.org.au)

A national organisation devoted to education, advocacy and supporting research into sleep and its disorders.

Disclaimer - Information provided here is general in nature and should not be seen as a substitute for professional medical advice. Ongoing concerns about sleep or other medical conditions should be discussed with your local doctor.



Special thanks to the Australasian Sleep Association for facilitating this fact sheet.

© Sleep Health Foundation, 2020  
Version 2: March 2020