

# Essential Guide to Sleep Problems and Autism: Summary



**RESEARCH AUTISM**  
IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF LIFE  
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## Introduction



This document is a summary of our essential guide on sleep problems in people on the autism spectrum.

It is not intended to provide advice or recommendations on what you should or should not do about those sleep problems.

But we hope it may help you think through some of the issues so that you can decide what you want to do.

## Sleep Problems

- Sleep problems are very common in people on the autism spectrum but not all people with autism have sleep problems.
- Those sleep problems include difficulty falling asleep, waking during the night, erratic/irregular sleep patterns, shorter total sleep, other arousals/disturbances, and daytime sleepiness.

## Associated Factors

There are a number of factors associated with sleep problems in people on the autism spectrum. These include:

- The nature of autism itself, including an insistence on routines and learnt behaviours.
- Neurological issues, such as an abnormal circadian rhythm (body clock) and related neurodevelopmental conditions (such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder).
- Medical problems (such as reflux and constipation) and mental health problems (such as stress, anxiety and depression).
- Other problems, including exhaustion and difficulties with learning and with memory.

Taken together, all of these problems may make it difficult to function normally at home, in school/college or in the workplace .

## Treatments

Most of the treatments used to help people on the autism spectrum with sleep problems are the same as those designed to help anyone with sleep problems.

Behavioural approaches include:

- Bedtime fading: going to bed at progressively earlier times.
- Scheduled awakening: waking someone up at predetermined times.
- Sleep restriction: limiting the time someone spends in bed.
- Extinction procedures: removing parental involvement during bedtime disruptions.
- Parent training programmes: educational programmes which teach parents how to use one or more of the techniques listed above.

Biomedical (biologically-based) approaches include the use of medications (such as melatonin), dietary supplements (such as valerian), and diets that exclude foodstuffs (such as additives).

Other treatments include aromatherapy, exercise programmes, homeopathy, light therapy, massage, mindfulness training, weighted blankets and yoga.

## Research Evidence

- There is very little research evidence on the effectiveness of most treatments for sleep problems in people on the autism spectrum.
- There is some evidence to suggest that some behavioural approaches may be beneficial in treating some sleep problems in some children and young people on the autism spectrum.
- There is some evidence to suggest that melatonin may be effective in decreasing the time it takes some children and young people on the autism spectrum to fall asleep, especially when used in conjunction with behavioural approaches.
- There is some evidence that some treatments (such as stimulant medications) used to help with other problems may make sleep problems worse.

## Clinical Guidance

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommended that:

- You should assess any sleep problem to determine its precise nature and any factors that might be contributing to it.
- You should develop a sleep plan in order to encourage the child or young person to develop positive sleep habits.
- You should use a diary to record sleeping patterns and bedtimes.
- You should not consider using drugs until it is clear that behavioural interventions are not working.
- You should consult a specialist paediatrician or psychiatrist before using drugs.
- You should review any drugs on a regular basis to ensure that the benefits outweigh the side effects and risks.
- You should refer the child or young person to a sleep expert if you observe loud snoring, choking or apnoeas (the cessation of airflow during sleep caused by an obstruction).

## Further Information

You can find more information on this topic (including the full version of this guide) on our website at <http://researchautism.net/sleep-and-autism>

## Research Autism

The Research Autism information service is part of the National Autistic Society, which is the leading UK charity for autistic people (including those with Asperger syndrome) and their families.

## Disclaimer

The information published in this guide has been written by non-medically qualified individuals. Any such information should be therefore be treated with care.

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Registered as a charity in England and  
Wales (269425) and Scotland (SC039427)

Date of Publication: April 2018

Date of Review: April 2021

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