

Pandemic worsening Americans' already terrible sleep, poll finds

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(HealthDay)—Many Americans are bone-weary following two straight

years of pandemic stress, and a new *HealthDay*/Harris Poll shows that sleeplessness is only part of the problem.

One-third of poll participants said they feel more tired now than they did before March 2020, the start of the COVID-19 [pandemic](#).

But just 28% said they're getting [less sleep](#) than before the pandemic.

"There's a gap there that basically says tiredness is not just driven by sleep," said Kathy Steinberg, vice president at The Harris Poll.

It's true people aren't getting enough sleep. On average, respondents said they're getting about 6.5 hours a night, below the amount recommended by sleep experts.

"Let's give the range of around 7 to 9 hours per night, with the [sweet spot](#) being around 8," Dr. Raj Dasgupta, a clinical associate professor with the University of Southern California's Keck School of Medicine, said in a [HealthDay NOW interview](#). "But I've got to tell you, it's not easy to get that number. You know, sleep always sounds like it's the easiest thing to get, but it's difficult to get good sleep."

Not only that, but the [poll results](#) point to deeper [anxieties](#) and stresses in the American psyche that are causing fatigue and harming sleep.

About 60% of people agreed that they often feel mentally tired even when they haven't been physically active, Steinberg noted.

A similar number (57%) said they can't sleep well because they have too much on their minds, while about half (49%) said they are often too anxious to sleep well.

Young adults hardest hit

Younger adults in particular say they are more tired now than before the pandemic, including 38% of those ages 18-34 and 36% of those ages 35-44.

People with kids also are likely to be more tired now. About 37% of people with children in their household and 35% of parents of kids under 18 said they're more tired these days than before the pandemic.

This weariness is probably driven by pandemic-related changes to work and home life, said Michelle Drerup, director of the Cleveland Clinic's Behavioral Sleep Medicine Program. Many have had to start working from home, and they've also been dealing with children who are not at school due to closures or hybrid learning.

"A lack of separation of work and [home life](#) is fatiguing," Drerup said. "There's all kinds of additional stress that's come with the pandemic, and stress is fatiguing in and of itself."

These results jibe with those of an ongoing Harris Poll that has been tracking the course of the pandemic.

The latest poll in that series revealed that 68% of Americans think that ongoing national feelings of [fear](#) are sensible. About 75% said they are fearful of health care shortages; 73% of a global recession or a new COVID variant; 70% of a new wave of COVID; 61% of returning to public activities, and 50% of losing their job.

Forty-seven percent of Americans say the worst is still ahead, the poll found, and Steinberg thinks the country is so on edge that number could go up with the slightest turn of the screw.

"It's really delicate right now. It could blip very quickly with any new surge or whatever happens," Steinberg said.

To get better sleep, about 36% of people in the *HealthDay*/Harris Poll said that they've tried to reduce stress, and another 33% said they're trying to manage their anxiety.

Unfortunately, many people also have turned to [sleeping pills](#). About 16% say they are now taking over-the-counter sleeping pills, while 28% have taken OTC sleep aids and 19% have gotten a prescription sleep medication during the pandemic.

The [poll](#) was conducted online from Jan. 25-27 among 2,039 U.S. adults ages 18 and older.

Problem may be worse than numbers show

Drerup said those numbers actually might be understated, based on what's happening at her clinic.

"When we look at prescriptions that are written for sleep medications, we see that's the case, that there are more prescriptions being written" in her clinic, Drerup said.

Sleeping pills are fine if used short-term, but Drerup warned that they aren't a reasonable long-term solution.

"Oftentimes, people report they don't have as much difficulty with waking at night or they fall asleep easier, but they don't feel any better the next day and they actually may feel worse, depending on the half-life of the medication, if they're having morning grogginess or other side effects from the medication," Drerup said.

Worse, the pills could be masking the real problem behind a person's sleeplessness, such as sleep apnea.

"Depending on what is disrupting their sleep, the medication may not be addressing that actual issue," Drerup said. "It's kind of like a Band-Aid. It covers up whatever might be contributing."

A disturbing number of people also seem to be turning to [alcohol](#) to help them sleep. About 36% said that when they drink alcohol, they typically sleep better.

"Some people feel that an [alcoholic drink](#) before bedtime or 'nightcap' helps them fall asleep faster, as it is a central nervous system depressant that may induce feelings of relaxation and sleepiness," Drerup said. "However, overall, it is more disruptive to sleep, particularly in the second half of the night.

"The use of alcohol has been linked to poor sleep quality and decreased REM sleep," Drerup continued. "People with alcohol use disorders commonly experience insomnia symptoms and studies have shown that alcohol use can worsen sleep apnea."

More information: Harvard Medical School has [tips to improve your sleep](#).

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