

Pandemic has severely disrupted sleep, increasing stress and medication use

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The COVID-19 pandemic is seriously affecting the sleep habits of half of those surveyed in a new study from The Royal and the University of Ottawa, leading to further stress and anxiety plus further dependence on sleep medication.

The global [pandemic](#)'s impact on [daily routines](#) extends to the bed, according to 'Profiles of sleep changes during the COVID-19 pandemic: Demographic, behavioural and psychological factors'. The study was led by Principal Investigator Rébecca Robillard, an Assistant Professor and co-director of the Sleep Laboratory of the School of Psychology at the University of Ottawa, and Head Scientist in the Sleep Research Unit at The Royal Institute of Mental Health Research and published in the *Journal of Sleep Research*.

Dr. Robillard and her team, which was comprised of nearly two dozen scientists from across North America, conducted an [online survey](#) of 5,525 Canadian during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. She walked us through some of the study's most important findings.

How has the pandemic affected our sleep?

RR: "The pandemic is having a diverse impact on people's sleep, with clinically meaningful sleep difficulties having undergone a sharp increase. We found that half of our participants showed signs of serious sleep problems during the pandemic. Specifically, we identified three different profiles of sleep changes: those who sleep more; those whose sleep schedule was pushed to later bed and wake-up times; and those who are getting less sleep than they did before the pandemic."

How is this significant change in sleep pattern affecting people's daily lives?

"Active changes people made on sleep-related behaviors during the pandemic not only affected sleep quality and quantity, but it also affected their psychological response to this unprecedented situation. Compared to those who are sleeping more, those who have later sleep schedules or shorter sleep cycles showed increased symptoms of insomnia and worsening symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression."

Were you able to identify any factors associated with this disruption of sleep patterns?

"Yes. New sleep difficulties seem to be disproportionately affecting women, those with families and family responsibilities, the employed, and individuals with chronic illnesses. It also impacted individuals with earlier wake-up times, higher stress levels, heavier alcohol use, and extra television exposure."

How have people coped?

"We have seen an increase in the use of sleeping medications during the pandemic. Considering the known risks for the development of tolerance with these medications, this may forecast a surge in more complex chronic insomnia cases in the long

run."

Overall, what can be read into people's sleep patterns during the pandemic?

"The large scale of sleep changes in response to the pandemic highlights the need for more accessible, yet tailored interventions to address sleep problems. Sleep and mental health issues are something to be expected with the current circumstances, but we never expected to see it hit this level. It is important to intervene to address the unique phenomenon that we are facing right now."

What are some ways people can improve their sleep, even during the pandemic?

"Some simple habits can help you to get a good night sleep. They include:

- Getting up at the same time each morning (even on weekends). Even if you fall asleep very late, you should still get up at the same time each morning;
- Develop relaxing pre-sleep rituals such as reading;
- Avoid caffeine and alcohol within six hours of bedtime, and don't smoke at bedtime;
- Exercise regularly. Get vigorous exercise such as jogging either in the morning or afternoon. Get mild exercise, such as walking, two to three hours before bedtime.

"If anxiety or stress is affecting your sleep, meditation, exercise, journaling or talking it out with someone you trust may help. The Royal's website has a number of tips for coping during the pandemic:

www.theroyal.ca/coping-during-covid-19-pandemic

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More information: Rebecca Robillard et al, Profiles of sleep changes during the COVID-19 pandemic: Demographic, behavioural and psychological factors, *Journal of Sleep Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1111/jsr.13231](https://doi.org/10.1111/jsr.13231)

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