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# Autism and Sleep

A guide to supporting autistic children with sleep

*Updated September 2025*

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# 1. Introduction

Sleep plays a vital role in everyone's health and wellbeing. It helps our bodies to rest and repair, supports learning and memory, and allows us to cope better with the demands of daily life. For autistic children, young people, and adults, getting enough good quality sleep can be especially important.

However, many autistic people experience difficulties with sleep. This can mean finding it hard to fall asleep, waking up during the night, or waking very early in the morning. Sometimes, even after a full night in bed, sleep can still feel restless or unrefreshing.

Poor sleep does not just affect the autistic person. It can also place a great strain on families and carers, leading to stress, exhaustion, and challenges in managing day-to-day routines.

The aim of this booklet is to:

- Explain why sleep difficulties are more common in autistic people.
- Explore the possible reasons behind these challenges.
- Share practical strategies and tools that may help improve sleep.
- Highlight where to seek further advice and support.

While there is no single solution that works for everyone, understanding the link between autism and sleep is the first step towards finding helpful strategies that suit each individual's needs.

# 2. Understanding Sleep

Before looking at why autistic people may struggle with sleep, it helps to understand how sleep works.

**Sleep Cycles**
Sleep happens in cycles. Each cycle lasts around 90 minutes and includes different stages:

- Light Sleep – where we drift off and our body starts to relax.
- Deep Sleep – when the body repairs itself and energy is restored.
- REM Sleep (Rapid Eye Movement) – when our brain is very active, and most dreaming happens. This stage supports learning, memory, and emotional wellbeing.

A good night's sleep means moving through several of these cycles. If sleep is broken or restless, the body may not get enough deep or REM sleep, leading to tiredness the next day.

**How Much Sleep Do We Need?**

Sleep needs vary depending on age, but most people need:

| Children 6-12 yrs | Teenagers 13-18 yrs. | Adults |
|---|---|---|
| 9-12 Hours per night | 8-10 Hours per night | 7-9 Hours per night |

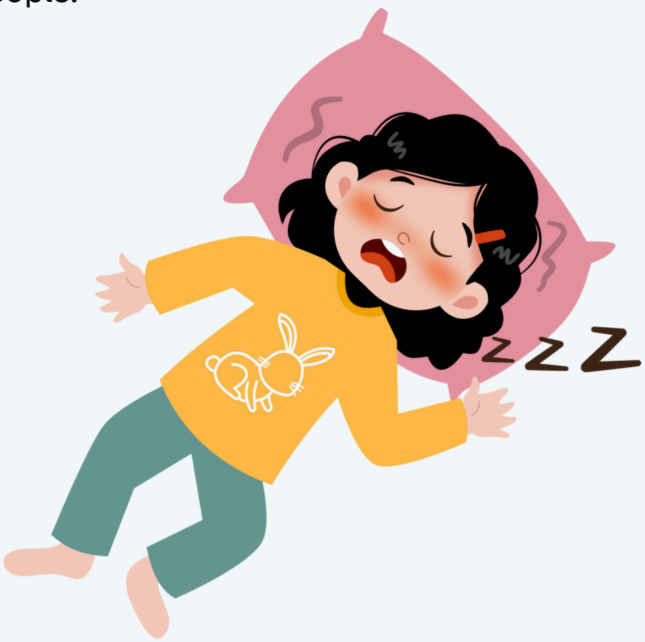
**Everyone is different – some people feel well-rested with slightly less, while others need more.**

**What Makes Good Quality Sleep?**

It’s not just about the number of hours spent in bed. Good quality sleep means:

- Falling asleep within a reasonable time
- Staying asleep through the night
- Waking up feeling refreshed
- Having enough energy to get through the day

Understanding these basics makes it easier to see why poor sleep can have such a big impact, especially for autistic people.



# 3. Sleep and Autism

Sleep difficulties are much more common in autistic people than in the general population. Research suggests that between 40% and 80% of autistic children and young people experience ongoing sleep problems, and many autistic adults continue to struggle with sleep throughout their lives.

### Common Sleep Difficulties in Autism

Autistic people may experience:

- **Difficulty falling asleep** – it can take much longer to switch off and relax at bedtime.
- **Night waking** – waking several times through the night and struggling to get back to sleep.
- **Early waking** – rising very early in the morning, sometimes after only a few hours of sleep.
- **Restless or poor-quality sleep** – tossing and turning, moving between light sleep stages, or waking feeling unrefreshed.

### Why Sleep Can Be Harder for Autistic People

There are many reasons why sleep challenges are more common, including:

- **Differences in body clocks** – autistic people may produce lower levels of melatonin, the hormone that helps us feel sleepy.
- **Sensory sensitivities** – small changes in noise, light, temperature, or bedding can make it hard to settle.
- **Anxiety and overthinking** – worries and racing thoughts can prevent relaxation at night.
- **Need for routine** – changes to bedtime routines or unexpected events can cause stress and delay sleep.
- **Co-occurring conditions** – conditions such as ADHD, gastrointestinal issues, or epilepsy can add to sleep difficulties.

Sleep is not just about resting – it is linked closely to emotional regulation, learning, and daily functioning. This is why it is so important to recognise and address sleep difficulties in autism.

# 4. Impact of Poor Sleep

When sleep is regularly disrupted, it can affect many areas of life. For autistic people, these effects are often more noticeable and can make day-to-day challenges harder to manage.

**Impact on the Autistic Person**

## 1 Mood and behaviour

When someone is tired, their ability to regulate emotions is reduced. For autistic people, who may already find emotional regulation more challenging, poor sleep can make mood swings, irritability, or meltdowns more frequent. Even small frustrations can feel overwhelming when the body and mind are running on limited rest.

## 2 Concentration and learning

Sleep helps the brain to process and store information. Without enough rest, attention spans become shorter, and memory recall is harder. This can make learning at school, college, or work much more difficult. It may also affect problem-solving skills and the ability to follow instructions, which can increase stress levels.

## 3 Communication

Tiredness can affect motivation and energy for social interaction. Autistic people who struggle with communication may find it even harder to process language, respond to questions, or engage in conversations when exhausted. This can lead to withdrawal from social situations or increased frustration when trying to communicate.

## 4 Physical health

Sleep is essential for the body to repair itself. Ongoing sleep deprivation weakens the immune system, meaning illnesses and infections are more likely. It can also cause headaches, muscle aches, and a general sense of fatigue. Over time, poor sleep has been linked to more serious health concerns, such as heart problems or obesity.

**Impact on the Autistic Person**

## 1 Stress and exhaustion

Broken nights affect the whole household, not just the autistic person. Parents and carers may find themselves waking several times each night to settle their child, leaving them drained the next day. Over time, this constant lack of sleep can lead to burnout, making it harder to cope with daily responsibilities.

## 2 Strain on relationships

When everyone is tired, patience wears thin. Siblings may feel frustrated if their own sleep is disrupted, while parents may argue more often due to stress and fatigue. Sleep difficulties can put a strain on the whole family unit, sometimes leaving relatives feeling disconnected or unsupported.

## 3 Daily functioning

Managing work, school runs, appointments, and household tasks is much harder when running on little sleep. Parents may find it difficult to concentrate at work, leading to mistakes or absences, while carers may struggle to keep up with routines. This can create extra pressure and feelings of falling behind.

## 4 Emotional wellbeing

Long-term sleep disruption can take a toll on mental health. Parents and carers may feel anxious, overwhelmed, or isolated, particularly if they believe others don't understand what they are going through. In some cases, ongoing lack of rest can contribute to low mood or depression.

# 5. Exploring Possible Causes

Sleep difficulties in autism rarely have one single cause. Often, a mix of factors combine to make falling or staying asleep more difficult. Understanding these possible causes can help families and professionals identify where small changes might make a big difference.

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## Sensory sensitivities

Many autistic people experience heightened or reduced sensitivity to sensory input. A small amount of light under the door, the hum of an appliance, or the texture of bedding can feel overwhelming and prevent sleep. Some may find certain sensations comforting, such as deep pressure from a weighted blanket, while others may need a very quiet and dark environment.

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## Co-occurring conditions

Conditions such as ADHD, anxiety, gastrointestinal problems, and epilepsy are more common in autistic people and can significantly affect sleep. For example, gastrointestinal discomfort may wake someone during the night, while ADHD can make it harder to wind down at bedtime. Managing these conditions alongside autism is often key to improving sleep.

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## Medication effects

Some medications used to support autism or related conditions have side effects that influence sleep. For instance, certain stimulants may make it harder to fall asleep, while others might increase night waking. It's important to discuss these issues with a GP or specialist if sleep problems seem linked to medication.

## 4 Routine and transitions

Autistic people often rely on predictable routines to feel safe and secure. Bedtime changes — such as staying up late, travelling, or moving house — can disrupt sleep patterns. Even small shifts, like different pyjamas or a change in the bedtime story, can feel unsettling and delay sleep.

## 5 Diet, screen time, and activity levels

Caffeine, sugary foods, or eating too close to bedtime can make it harder to sleep. Equally, using screens before bed can overstimulate the brain, particularly because the blue light from devices reduces melatonin production. On the other hand, not getting enough physical activity during the day can leave the body restless at night.

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### A combination of factors

Sleep problems are often the result of several factors working together rather than a single cause. For example, a child may wake in the night because of stomach discomfort, and then find it hard to get back to sleep due to anxiety or sensory sensitivities. This overlap can make it harder to identify the main issue without careful observation.

### Using a sleep diary

Keeping a simple sleep diary can help spot patterns. Recording bedtime routines, wake-up times, naps, and anything unusual (such as diet, screen use, or stress) can highlight triggers that may not be obvious day to day. This information can be useful for families and for professionals such as GPs or sleep specialists.

# 6. Strategies to Support Better Sleep

There is no single “fix” for sleep difficulties, and what works for one autistic person may not work for another. However, trying different strategies can help build better sleep habits over time. Small, consistent changes often make the biggest difference.

### Establishing consistent bedtime routines

A clear, predictable routine helps signal to the body and mind that it’s time to wind down. This might include having a bath, putting on pyjamas, brushing teeth, and reading a calming story. Keeping the same order every night provides reassurance and helps reduce anxiety around bedtime.

### Sleep environment adaptations

The bedroom should feel safe, calm, and comfortable. This could mean using blackout blinds to block out light, adding white noise to mask sudden sounds, or experimenting with bedding textures. Weighted blankets or body pillows may provide comfort through deep pressure, but always introduce them gradually and safely.

### Relaxation and calming activities

Winding down before bed is just as important as the sleep itself. Activities such as gentle stretches, listening to calming music, or using mindfulness exercises can help reduce anxiety. Avoid stimulating play or high-energy activity close to bedtime.

## Managing screen time and stimulation

The blue light from screens reduces melatonin production, making it harder to fall asleep. Limiting screen use at least an hour before bed can be helpful. Instead, encourage quieter activities such as drawing, puzzles, or reading.

## Visual schedules and social stories

Visuals can help autistic people understand what to expect at bedtime. A simple chart showing each step of the routine can make the process predictable and reduce resistance. Social stories about going to sleep can also help explain why rest is important in a way that feels accessible.

## Gradual changes vs. sudden adjustments

Changing sleep habits can be challenging. Gradual steps, such as moving bedtime earlier by 10 minutes each night, are often more successful than sudden shifts. Patience and consistency are key, and small improvements should be recognised and celebrated.

# 7. Professional Support and Interventions

Sometimes, despite trying different strategies at home, sleep problems continue. In these cases, it may be helpful to seek advice from professionals who can look at underlying causes and offer tailored support.

**When to seek medical advice**

If sleep difficulties are ongoing, severe, or affecting daily life, it is important to talk to your GP. You should also seek advice if there are signs of sleep apnoea (such as loud snoring or pauses in breathing), regular night terrors, or seizures during sleep.

**Role of GPs and paediatricians**

A GP may explore possible medical reasons for sleep difficulties, such as gastrointestinal problems, allergies, or side effects from medication. They can also make referrals to paediatricians or specialists if more in-depth assessment is needed.

**Sleep clinics and specialists**

Some hospitals and community health services have sleep clinics that can provide detailed assessments. These clinics may ask families to complete sleep diaries, carry out overnight studies, or trial different interventions. Their advice often focuses on sleep hygiene, routines, and managing contributing health conditions.

**Possible use of melatonin**

In some cases, a doctor may prescribe melatonin, a hormone that helps regulate the body clock. Melatonin can be helpful in supporting autistic people to fall asleep more easily, but it is not suitable for everyone and should only be used under medical supervision. It is usually considered once other strategies have been tried first.

**Working with schools and other services**

For children and young people, schools may also play a role in supporting better sleep by adjusting routines, reducing anxiety, or offering strategies during the day. Sharing information about sleep patterns can help teachers understand how tiredness might affect learning and behaviour.

**Professional input does not always lead to quick fixes, but it can provide reassurance, identify underlying medical issues, and help families access more tailored support.**

# 8. Supporting Parents and Carers

Caring for an autistic child or adult with ongoing sleep difficulties can be exhausting. It is important to recognise the impact on parents and carers, and to put support in place for your own wellbeing as well as for your family

**Looking after your own sleep**

Try to rest whenever possible, even if this means adjusting your own bedtime to match your child's. Short naps, relaxation exercises, or simply taking time to wind down can make a difference. Protecting your own sleep where you can helps you cope better with the demands of the day.

**Sharing the load**

If possible, take turns with another parent, carer, or trusted family member to manage night waking. Even one or two nights of uninterrupted sleep each week can greatly improve energy levels and emotional resilience.

**Asking for help**

It can be difficult to admit when you are struggling, but reaching out for support is important. Friends, family, and support groups may be able to offer practical help or emotional reassurance. Sometimes, simply talking to others who have experienced similar challenges can reduce feelings of isolation.

**Support groups and services**

Local autism charities, community groups, and online networks often provide safe spaces for sharing advice and experiences. Services such as ASD Helping Hands can also offer information, training, and guidance to help families manage the challenges of sleep difficulties.

# 9. Practical Tools and Resources

Having the right tools can make it easier to track sleep patterns and introduce positive routines. These resources can help autistic people, parents, and carers build consistency and find what works best.

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### Sleep diaries

A sleep diary is a simple way to track bedtime, waking times, naps, and night waking. By recording daily patterns, families can spot triggers such as late screen use, diet, or changes in routine. Sleep diaries can also be very helpful when talking to professionals, as they provide a clear picture of what is happening.

### Bedtime routine charts

Visual charts showing each step of the bedtime routine can give structure and predictability.
For example, “bath → pyjamas → brush teeth → story → lights out.”
Using symbols or pictures makes routines easier to follow, especially for younger children or those who respond well to visuals.

### Social stories about sleep

Social stories explain situations in a way that is clear and reassuring. A social story about going to bed might describe why sleep is important, what will happen at bedtime, and how safe it is to rest. These can reduce anxiety and resistance around sleep.

### Apps and trackers

Some families find sleep tracking apps or wearable devices helpful. These can record sleep length, quality, and patterns. However, they should be used with care, as too much focus on tracking can increase anxiety. They are most useful when used alongside diaries and observations.

### Sensory supports

Items such as blackout blinds, white noise machines, or weighted blankets can make a big difference. Not all sensory supports will suit every individual, so it may take some trial and error to find what feels most comfortable.

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### Consistency is key

Whichever tools or resources you choose to use, the most important factor is consistency. Sleep routines and supports often take time to show results, and it can be tempting to stop if improvements are not immediate. Keeping to the same approach for several weeks gives the body and mind a chance to adjust.

### Involving the autistic person

Where possible, involve the autistic child, young person, or adult in choosing which tools to use.

Allowing them to help design a bedtime chart, select a sensory support, or decide on a calming activity can increase motivation and reduce resistance.

Making sleep strategies collaborative can help them feel more in control.

# 10. Where to Find Help

Sleep difficulties can feel overwhelming, but you are not alone. There are organisations and services that can offer guidance, practical strategies, and emotional support for both autistic people and their families.

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**ASD Helping Hands**

We provide information, advice, and resources for families and individuals across Norfolk and beyond. Our Autism Advisors can help explore the challenges you are facing, suggest strategies, and signpost you to specialist services where needed. Visit our website or contact us directly for more details.

**GPs and health professionals**

Your GP should be the first point of contact for persistent sleep problems, especially if there are concerns about medical conditions such as epilepsy, gastrointestinal issues, or sleep apnoea. They can make referrals to paediatricians, sleep clinics, or other specialists.

**National Autistic Society (NAS)**

The NAS offers a wide range of information about autism and sleep, along with support lines and forums where families can connect with others facing similar challenges.

Website: www.autism.org.uk

**Contact (for families with disabled children)**

Contact provides information and advice on a wide range of issues, including sleep. They also run workshops and have resources designed specifically for parents and carers.

Website: www.contact.org.uk

**ERIC (The Children's Bowel and Bladder Charity)**

For families where toileting difficulties contribute to sleep disruption, ERIC provides helpful resources and practical advice.

Website: www.eric.org.uk

**Local support groups**

Many communities have local parent support groups, peer networks, or charities that share strategies around sleep and wellbeing. Connecting with other families can reduce feelings of isolation and provide reassurance that you are not alone.

# 11. Final Thoughts

Sleep difficulties are very common in autism, and they can affect the whole family. While it can sometimes feel overwhelming, it is important to remember that small changes can make a big difference over time. Building routines, adapting the environment, and trying different strategies step by step can all help improve rest and wellbeing.

Not every approach will work straight away, and progress may be gradual. Patience, consistency, and celebrating even small successes are key. Where difficulties continue, professional support is available and you should never feel that you have to manage these challenges alone.

Remember: better sleep benefits not just the autistic person, but the whole family. With the right support, understanding, and tools, it is possible to create calmer nights and brighter days.

ASD Helping Hands

## Our Mission

"Empowering autistic individuals and those around them, ASD Helping Hands is dedicated to fostering confidence, independence, and inclusion at every stage of life. We provide guidance, education, and resources to help individuals, families, and professionals navigate autism with knowledge and empowerment.

We champion the rights of autistic people, striving to create a more inclusive society while ensuring our services remain accessible, reliable, and built on trust."

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*Updated March 2025*