

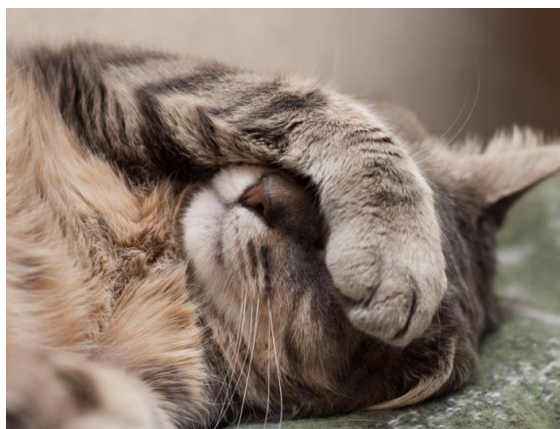


## COVID-somnia

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“Neurologists who specialize in sleep disorders are seeing an increase in sleep disorders associated with COVID-19, a surge they're terming ‘COVID-somnia.’ ”

— This and all subsequent quotes: Dan Hurley, *Neurology Today*, July 2020



In all truth I have never been a great sleeper. Since I was a child, the middle of the night was often a time for me to process things that my day didn't allow. Some of my best decisions and many of my articles (including this one) occur to me when the moon is up. I was getting this under control with a combination of herbs and good sleep hygiene, but that's not happening now.

For me the magic hour seems to be 4:30 a.m. I wake up and no matter what I do, that's often it for the night. I try all the things I tell other people, including a warm shower, mild exercise, listening to a book on tape. But most of the time, like tonight, I'm still awake— it's 6 a.m. and the amount of benefit I would get by trying to get back to sleep is so minimal that I might as well stay awake and play Baby Spider. Or write an article about COVID-somnia.

## **Our Internal Clock**

“From insomnia to hypersomnia, night terrors to the misuse of sleep medications, the phenomenon is being reported and treated not only in people recovering from COVID-19, but in the far larger number of people whose lives have been turned upside down by fear and social isolation.”

Yep, so that probably means all of us. It’s interesting that Hurley’s article talks about not only insomnia but hypersomnia. Hypersomnia means you’re sleeping way too much. Your schedule has been changed, or your job lost, so the basic framework of your life is different under COVID and you are sleeping way more than you need to. I haven’t seen many people with this problem; most of the people I have seen are not getting enough sleep. But both problems can be disruptive. Both problems break a normal healthy rhythm of sleep.

“ ‘ Sunlight is our biggest zeitgeber—literally ‘time giver,’ said Daniel A. Barone, MD, FAASM, FAAN, associate medical director of the Weill Cornell Center for Sleep Medicine. ‘If people aren't leaving their homes because of fear of COVID-19, if they're not going to work as they once did, then they aren't getting that daily exposure to sunlight in the morning. That can disrupt their internal clock.’ ”

We do have an internal clock— time to wake, eat, play, exercise, work, and so on. It’s important to keep that clock fairly regular. Our bodies find a pattern, and stick with it. But anxiety, stress, and disruptions of your normal pattern disturb your clock. It’s just like when you travel; you have to reset. A lot of us are in need of a reset during COVID.

## **The Cycles of Sleep**

Many people have gone to their physicians and asked for sleep assistance. Those with resistant sleep problems often get a prescription for benzodiazepines, which get you to sleep but cause other problems. They can be quite addictive and may affect cognition, especially in older adults. “In the long-term, they affect your sleep quality and your cognition,” said Mark Boulos, MD, assistant professor of neurology at the University of Toronto. “They also reduce slow-wave sleep.”

There’s the rub. In order to be healthy and happy we need to get several kinds of sleep. We need to get light sleep, deep sleep (slow

wave sleep), and REM sleep. The [sleepfoundation.org](https://www.sleepfoundation.org) talks about four stages of sleep. But for simplicity's sake I'm going to make that three. The first two are light sleep, so I'll conflate them.

Light sleep is the falling asleep feeling when you are calming down, your breathing is slowing, and you are getting relaxed. It can last for a couple of minutes to a half an hour. You might have other times of light sleep during the course of the night. That's why there are so-called "sleep cycles." You may cycle through all the different periods of sleep several times during the night.

The second type of sleep is deep sleep. That's the kind of sleep where you are down for the count. If you are woken during this time, you may feel like you have to fight to wake up. It's a time of deep physical and mental restoration. You may feel immobile and be deeply and slowly breathing.

Third is the REM stage. REM is an acronym for rapid eye movement. If you've ever watched someone sleep you may notice that it looks like their eyes are going back-and-forth underneath their lids. That's REM. During this period you are dreaming. If you are awoken it's sometimes very startling and disorienting. You may feel like you are changing realities (which, really, you are). REM is believed to be the place where we work out our psychological issues and make decisions. It is often where old emotional injuries get worked on. That's why a therapist may ask you about your dreams; they can be a roadmap to what may be going on in your parallel awake life. REM sleep during COVID may bring up old injuries that have been put aside and COVID has given them the opportunity to be healed— perhaps because we are receiving less stimulation during COVID life, or the COVID experience itself with its fear and isolation may be triggering traumatic old events that are being reawakened during our REM sleep.

We need about one to two hours of deep sleep (think of it as physical repair sleep), and several cycles of REM sleep (emotional repair sleep), which can be anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour each. That's the basic requirement for health. It doesn't have to be every night but it does have to be most nights. Some people are experiencing severe nightmares during COVID, possibly a way of working out old trauma. Again, this is a good time to talk to someone about this to see if you can resolve issues and clean house. You might want to keep pen and paper next to your bed so you can record the details of your dreams.

## Natural Sleep Hygiene

Instead of drugs and their side effects, what can we do to get a good night's sleep and reset our internal clock? I've mentioned a few strategies for relaxation; here are some suggestions, supported by research, to help reset.

Melatonin can be very beneficial in both getting you to sleep and keeping you asleep. I have recently discovered time-release melatonin. Regular melatonin hadn't worked for me. The time-release melatonin helps me to stay asleep, and as a side benefit it has been evidenced to be an anti-carcinogenic drug as well. Usually 3mg or 5 mg is quite enough, but check with your healthcare professional. I'm not a fan of a lot of the stronger drugs used for sleep. If you're having a severe problem, it sometimes helps to take something like Benadryl for three days in a row to create a new sleep pattern. But again, please check with your doctor before you do this.

Set a schedule. I'm typically someone who resists being scheduled, but with sleep hygiene, schedule is a major factor. Getting up at the same time of day, getting some good exercise and stretching, getting mentally stimulated, eating your meals on a schedule— all of these things can effect your sleep. Important note in regard to sleep: some of us are nocturnal and some of us are diurnal. What that means is that some of us are day people and some of us are night people. If you wake up hungry and raring to go, you are probably a diurnal. You should adjust your sleep schedule accordingly; you are an earlier-to-bed and earlier-to-rise person. If you are a nocturnal, you may be better served by going to bed later and getting up later. Forcing yourself to go to bed early may actually be harming your sleep cycles. A good clue to whether you're a nocturnal is if you wake up in the morning and you say "Coffee, coffee, no food."

Get off your device an hour before bed, or wear amber glasses until you go to sleep. You've heard this before, but blue light, which is like early sunlight, keeps you awake. Amber light, which is like sunset, tells your body it's time to think about going to bed pretty soon. The winter is especially hard in this regard and some of you might be helped by getting an inexpensive SAD light (for Seasonal Affective Disorder). Of course, getting some time out in the sun is the best possible thing but that is climate dependent.

Mood and attention, ability to fight infections, and general mental health are all affected by sleep. COVID is impacting many aspects of



our life and there's a lot we just can't control. But we can try to control our sleep hygiene, and get some good rest, which will help make the rest of it easier to deal with.

Peaceful dreams.

Namaste,  
Wendy