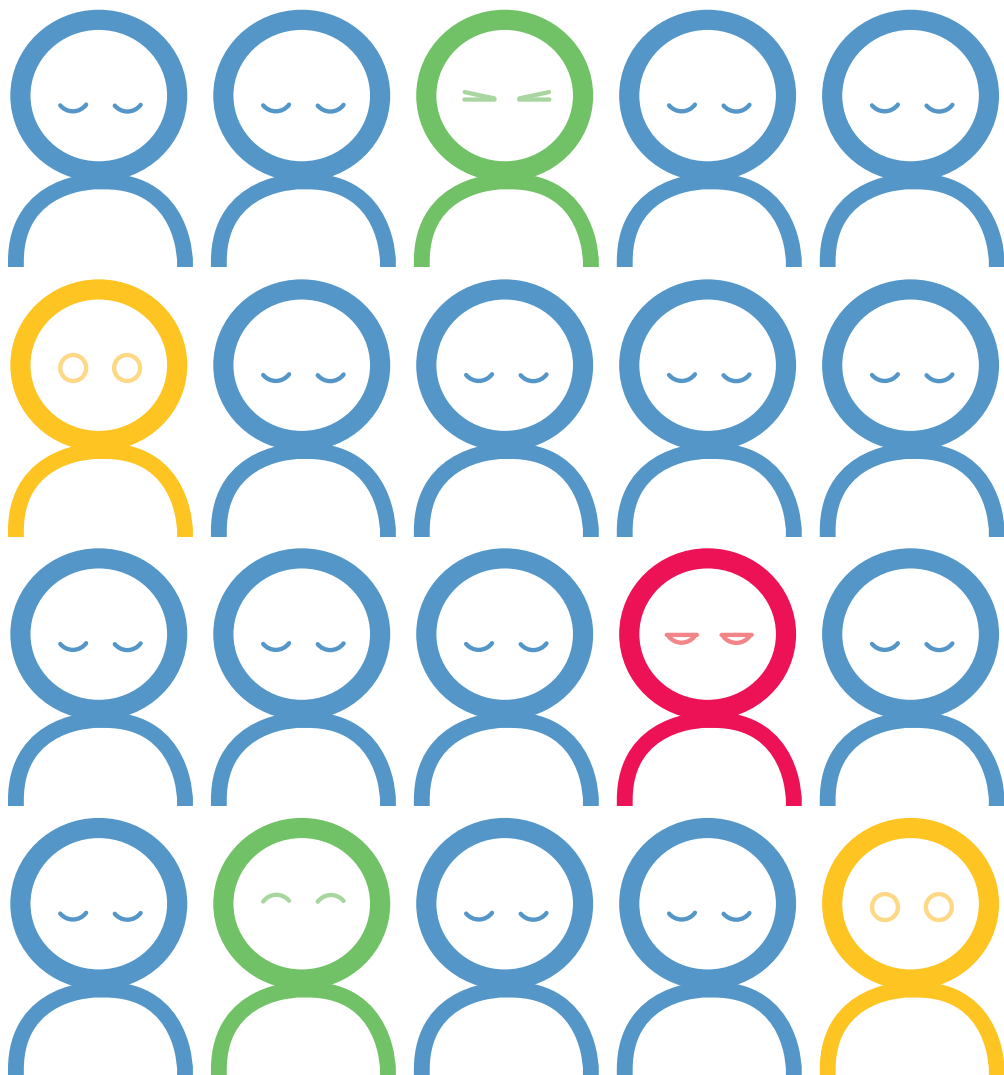




Understanding  
Society

# Sleep patterns and health

Using Understanding Society to investigate the link  
between sleep and personal well-being



## Everyone needs sleep – but how do people in the UK fare with this daily battle for much-needed shut-eye? What are the implications for policy makers when it comes to deciding how to spend their limited funds on improving the health and well-being of an ageing society?

While most people understand how important sleep is to their health, just how in control are people of their sleep habits? A range of factors cause people to toss and turn at night: illness, relationship concerns, pressures at work, noisy neighbours or even just a lumpy mattress.

In one of the first commercial uses of Understanding Society, Which? The Consumer Association commissioned NatCen to investigate the links between sleep and health.

NatCen went on to produce a more detailed report, *Sleep patterns and health – Analysis of the Understanding Society dataset*, which provides fascinating insights into the UK's quest for a sound night's sleep and for policy makers who want the key to a happier, healthier society.

### Key Findings

Research found that high quality sleep is elusive for many in the UK and that this is associated with self-perceptions of health. It showed strong connections between sleeping less than the recommended seven hours a night and negative perceptions of health.

- about a third (35%) of people in the UK said they sleep less than seven hours a night
- just over a half (56%) reported sleeping seven to nine hours
- one in ten (10%) sleep more than nine hours
- while three in five (60%) adults felt calm and peaceful all or most of the time during the past month, these feelings vary significantly depending on hours slept
- 20% of participants report 'often' waking up in the middle of the night
- 22% rate sleep quality as bad
- one in ten of us struggles to get to sleep within 30 minutes more than once on most nights

- just less than one in five of us has sought a chemical solution to the sleep problem
- two in three (65%) adults noted feeling calm and peaceful when sleeping seven hours a day or more
- in contrast, only a half (50%) of those who slept for less than seven hours a day felt this way
- 42% of single people compared with 34% of couples reported having less than seven hours sleep a night.

### The research

The research was commissioned by Which? to provide context to an article reviewing a variety of mattresses. The magazine wanted evidence on the importance of sleep and specifically its links with health.

Understanding Society was used to compare people's sleep patterns with a range of health and lifestyle measures such as feeling calm and peaceful, levels of energy, satisfaction with overall health and household composition.

Participants on the survey were asked questions such as:

- How many hours of actual sleep did you usually get at night during the last month?
- During the past month, how often have you had trouble sleeping because you cannot get to sleep within 30 minutes?
- During the past month, how often have you had trouble sleeping because you wake up in the middle of the night or early in the morning?
- During the past month, how often have you taken medicine (prescribed or 'over the counter') to help you sleep?

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***A greater understanding of what comes first – poor health or lack of sleep – and what influences this relationship could contribute to public discussions on personal well-being, as well as public health policy initiatives.***

**Matt Barnes, NatCen**

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## A RANGE OF FACTORS THAT CAN CAUSE PEOPLE TO TOSS AND TURN ...



Relationship concerns



Noisy neighbour

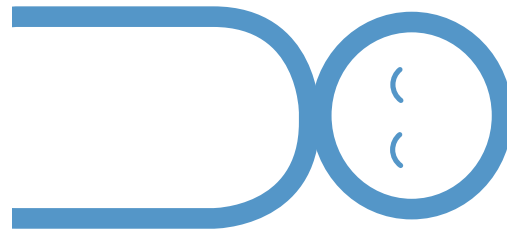


Illness

65% of adults said they feel calm and peaceful when sleeping seven hours a day or more...



Pressures at work



Where health is concerned, participants are asked things such as:

- During the past four weeks, how much of the time have you accomplished less than you would like as a result of any emotional problems (such as feeling depressed or anxious)?
- During the past four weeks, how much of the time did you work or do other regular activities less carefully than usual as a result of any emotional problems, such as feeling depressed or anxious?
- How much of the time during the past four weeks did you have a lot of energy?
- How much of the time during the past four weeks have you felt downhearted and depressed?

Participants were asked to respond with either 'all', 'most', 'some', 'a little' or 'none of the time'.

### Policy Implications

The research shows that sleep patterns vary across the population and that there are various ways in which people struggle to sleep – some of which appear to be associated with how people perceive their general health.

A greater understanding of what comes first – poor health or lack of sleep and what influences this relationship could contribute to public discussions on personal well-being, as well as public health policy initiatives.

Further understanding of the dynamic relationships of sleep, and its potential policy impact, will be revealed through longitudinal analysis as Understanding Society moves through future waves.

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*We used Understanding Society because of its unprecedented sample size and because it asks participants both about sleep and health. It was the ideal source of data for us and we were very pleased with the results we got which demonstrated a very clear link between the two.*

**Dom Longford,  
Consumer  
Association, Which?**

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### Further information and resources

An article outlining the research was featured in *Which?* Magazine alongside the organisation's product reviews of memory foam mattresses.

Read the NatCen report [www.natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/sleep-patterns-and-health/](http://www.natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/sleep-patterns-and-health/)

Listen to a podcast with Which researcher Dom Longford [www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/podcasts/2013/07](http://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/podcasts/2013/07)

If you would like a more detailed briefing on this research or to discuss how you can make use of Understanding Society in your research please email [info@understanding-society.ac.uk](mailto:info@understanding-society.ac.uk)

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Understanding Society  
Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER)  
University of Essex  
Wivenhoe Park  
Colchester  
CO4 3SQ  
Tel: +44 (0) 1206 872957

[www.understandingsociety.ac.uk](http://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk)

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 Understanding Society – UK Household Longitudinal Study

This case study is part of a series aimed at potential users of Understanding Society data, including: policy makers, researchers and people in a position to influence social policy. If you are using data from Understanding Society and would like to profile your work, please email [info@understandingsociety.ac.uk](mailto:info@understandingsociety.ac.uk)



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