Sweet Dreams: The Importance of Good Sleep for Healthy Ageing

SOPA News

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Overview of ILC's Partners Programme in collaboration with University of Surrey

Webinar – 15 January 2026

Summary & Key Insights

This webinar, *Sweet Dreams: the importance of good sleep for healthy ageing*, was delivered as part of the ILC's Partners Programme and developed in collaboration with the University of Surrey's Centre of Excellence on Ageing.

The session explored the growing evidence linking sleep quality, sleep regularity, and sleep-related conditions with long-term health outcomes, particularly in an ageing population.

Good sleep is increasingly recognised as a cornerstone of healthy ageing. In the UK, it is estimated that the public misses out on a full night's sleep every week, and **16% of adults get fewer than six hours per night**. As sleep declines by around **10 minutes per decade**, older adults face increased risk of comorbidities linked to poor sleep.

The webinar examined why sleep matters, how sleep changes with age, and what individuals, employers, and policymakers can do to improve sleep health and longevity.

Speakers

- **Mark Chataway**, Managing Partner, Finn Partners *(Chair)*
- **Prof Derk-Jan Dijk**, Professor of Sleep and Physiology & Director, Surrey Sleep Research Centre, University of Surrey
- **Ben Lumley**, Co-Head of Programme, Night Club
- **Yvonne Sonsino**, Trustee, ILC
- **Jessi Kullar**, Policy and Public Affairs Manager, Drinkaware

Key Messages

Why Sleep Matters for Healthy Ageing

Sleep is not simply “rest time”, it is an active biological process essential for:

- **Cognitive Function**
  Good sleep supports attention, memory retention, and decision-making. Impaired sleep affects the brain as significantly as alcohol.
- **Brain Health**
  Sleep helps clear toxins from the brain, potentially slowing Alzheimer’s progression.
- **Cardiovascular Health**
  Adequate sleep stabilises blood pressure and heart rate. Poor sleep increases risks of heart disease and stroke.
- **Metabolic Health**
  Sleep regulates hormones affecting appetite and glucose processing, reducing the risk of obesity and type 2 diabetes.
- **Immune Function**
  Consistent sleep strengthens the body’s defences.
- **Mental and Emotional Well-being**
  Sleep reduces stress, stabilises mood, and improves resilience.

How Sleep Changes with Age

- Shorter sleep duration
- More frequent night-time awakenings
- Less time in deep, restorative sleep
- Influences from hormonal changes, stress, medications, and health conditions

Core Components of Healthy Sleep

1. **Quantity** – Enough hours of sleep (varies by individual)
2. **Quality** – Uninterrupted, refreshing sleep
3. **Consistency** – Regular sleep–wake times, shown to be as important as duration

Notably, a 2024 study found that **sleep regularity is a stronger predictor of reduced mortality than sleep duration alone**, with the most regular sleepers having a **20–48% lower risk of death**.

Improving Sleep for Better Ageing

- **Establish Routines** – Keep regular bed and wake times
- **Optimise the Environment** – Comfortable, dark, cool, and quiet
- **Manage Stress** – Mindfulness, breathing techniques, relaxation
- **Treat Conditions** – Seek help for insomnia, sleep apnoea (e.g., CPAP), or other issues
- **Light Exposure** – Bright morning light helps regulate circadian rhythms

Health Risks of Poor Sleep

- Increased risk of **Alzheimer's disease**, **type 2 diabetes**, **heart disease**, **stroke**, and some cancers
- Greater likelihood of weight gain
- Higher overall mortality risk
- Negative impacts on mental health and emotional stability

The Scale of the Issue

Over **14 million UK adults** are estimated to live with an **undiagnosed sleep condition**. Common sleep-related conditions in the UK include:

Condition	Estimated Affected Population	% o
Chronic insomnia	4–6 million	6–1
Sleep apnoea	1.5–2.5 million	2–4
Narcolepsy	~30,000	0.04

Sleep challenges can also stem from shift work—**27% of UK employees** work at night—making sleep regularity difficult and increasing long-term risks.

Recommended Resources

- **BITC & Public Health England – Sleep & Recovery Toolkit (Free, 52 pages)**
  https://www.bitc.org.uk/toolkit/sleep-and-recovery-toolkit/
- **The Sleep Charity – Workplace Sleep Support**
  https://thesleepcharity.org.uk/
- **ILC Article: *Sweet Dreams – The Importance of Good Sleep for Healthy Ageing***
  https://ilcuk.org.uk/sweet-dreams-the-importance-of-good-sleep-for-healthy-ageing/

Final Thoughts

Humans spend a third of their lives asleep, yet no two nights of sleep are the same. Sleep is influenced by health, environment, work patterns, and socioeconomic factors. Addressing these diverse challenges is vital to support people to sleep well, age well, and live longer, healthier lives.

Consistent, good-quality sleep is not a luxury, it is a biological necessity for longevity.