



FASD-CAN AOTEAROA INFORMATION SHEETS

FASD and Sleep

Quality sleep is essential for physical growth, brain development, emotional regulation, and overall wellbeing. When children do not get enough restorative sleep, they may become irritable or hyperactive, and their ability to cope, focus, and manage behaviour is reduced. Long-term sleep deprivation affects mental health, learning, and development.

While sleep needs vary, most people require the following amounts to be well rested:

- **Newborns (0–3 months):** 14–17 hours
- **Infants (4–11 months):** 12–15 hours
- **Toddlers (1–2 years):** 11–14 hours
- **Preschoolers (3–5 years):** 10–13 hours
- **School-aged children (6–13 years):** 9–11 hours
- **Teenagers (14–17 years):** 8–10 hours
- **Young adults (18–25 years):** 7–9 hours

FASD and Sleep Challenges

An individual with FASD uses significantly more mental energy to get through each day. Their brain works much harder than a neurotypical brain, making sleep essential for recovery and regulation.

Sleep difficulties are common for people with FASD due to heightened sensitivity to their environment and difficulty winding down. These challenges may include:

- Taking a long time to fall asleep
- Frequent waking during the night
- Nightmares, sleep-walking, or sleep-talking
- Ongoing daytime tiredness

Lack of sleep affects thinking, impulse control, attention, and behaviour. When sleep is poor, other supports and strategies are far less effective. Caregivers are also impacted, as ongoing hypervigilance and disrupted sleep are exhausting.

Suggestions for Better Sleep Habits

1. Consistent bedtime routine

Create a predictable, calming routine that signals sleep is coming. Use visual schedules where helpful and stick to the routine consistently to reduce anxiety.

2. Calm sleep environment

Keep the sleeping area quiet, uncluttered, and low-stimulation. Remove technology, use soft lighting, and consider blackout curtains.

3. Daily physical activity

Regular exercise during the day supports better sleep. Choose activities suited to the individual's interests and abilities.

4. Soothing drinks

Warm milk or caffeine-free herbal teas (e.g. chamomile) can help promote sleep. Avoid caffeine and sugary foods, especially in the evening.

5. Limit screens

Blue light disrupts sleep rhythms. Replace screens with reading, calming music, or soundscapes such as white noise or ocean sounds.

6. Warm water

A warm bath or shower before bed can relax the body and prepare the brain for sleep.

7. Breathing and relaxation

Practice slow, deep breathing together as part of the bedtime routine.

8. Touch and sensory supports

Some individuals benefit from massage or weighted blankets, depending on sensory preferences.

9. Positive thinking and reassurance

Gently guide thoughts toward positive images or dreams. Talk through the next day's plan to reduce anxiety.

10. Safety and caregiver rest

Secure the sleeping area so caregivers can rest without worry. Window stays or door alarms may help provide reassurance.

11. Medication support

If sleep issues persist, or stimulant medications are affecting sleep, talk with your doctor. Melatonin may be helpful for some tamariki or rangatahi with FASD and is not addictive.

A Final Note

Try to be patient with yourself and with your loved one. Take deep breaths, celebrate small wins, and remember to tell them they are loved. Sleep is a journey, not a quick fix.



Attribution: NonCommercial-ShareAlike

© FASD-CAN Inc. Aotearoa
January 2025