- Mobile application

Bedtime apps that play nature sounds give you an extra half hour of sleep

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Listening to a recording of rainfall, a crackling fire or stephen Fry narrating Harry Potter has become as much a part of many people's bedtime routine as hot cocoa or a soak in a warm bath.

And the latest methods of helping us drift off seem be just as effective, it seems.

For a study has found that listening to the sounds of nature or audio stories before bed can boost sleep by an average of 30 minutes a night.

those who use smartphone sleep apps up to three times a week can gain around three and a half hours of extra shut-eye. they are also less likely to suffer from anxiety or depression.

experts believe apps can distract us from worry and stress, and reduce levels of brain activity – known as pre-sleep sympathetic arousal – helping us to drift off.

increased demands from work, high stress and greater use of digital technology have led to more of us struggling with sleep difficulties. While between seven and nine hours is recommended as the optimum amount each night, an estimated one in five adults is judged not to be getting enough sleep.

sleep apps have boomed in popularity in recent years, with some even recommended by the nHs.

the most popular typically play calming sounds such as rainfall, or offer bedtime stories read by wellknown names.

in one of the first studies of its kind, researchers wanted to see if using these tools actually could aid sleep.

the research involved 300 people, who were quizzed and scored on their sleep habits, including difficulties nodding off and staying asleep.

they completed questionnaires on alertness, sleepiness and tiredness during usual waking hours, as well as work-related productivity.

some 180 went on to use the Unmind app, choosing natural soundscapes or narrated stories as a tool to help them nod off, or to get back to sleep.

At the start of the study, the average sleep time was six hours and 15 minutes. At the end, this went up by 30 minutes. time taken to fall asleep also fell by a third to less than 30 minutes.

Presenteeism – productivity lost when employees are not fully functioning in the workplace – fell from 43.7 per cent to 27.2 per cent.

study co-author Kate Cavanagh, Professor of Clinical Psychology at sussex University, said: 'if supported by further research, these tools could have significant public health implications and an impact on businesses who could stand to benefit from a reduction in presenteeism.'