

Sleep Hygiene: Ten Useful Strategies

'Sleep hygiene' basically means doing things that improve our quality and quantity of sleep and reducing behaviours that interfere with sleep. Below you'll find a number of recommendations for improving your sleep hygiene.

No single strategy mentioned works for everyone - but most people will find most of these strategies are helpful. But be flexible with them: don't turn them into RULES THAT YOU MUST ALWAYS OBEY. Experiment with them - adapt and modify them as necessary - and notice what difference they make to your sleep quality over time.

1. Restrict stimulants before bed

Avoid products containing caffeine (tea, coffee, chocolate) *for at least 4 hours before bedtime.*

Avoid nicotine (cigarettes, vaping, nicotine patches, etc.) *for at least one hour* before bedtime, and when waking during the night.

2. Restrict alcohol and eating close to bedtime

Don't drink alcohol around bedtime, because although it often promotes sleep at first, it can disrupt sleep later in the night.

Don't eat large meals, especially those packed with fat and protein, immediately before bed.

3. Maintain regular sleeping hours

The more regular your hours for getting up and going to bed, the better your sleep is likely to be. And the more irregular, the worse your sleep is likely to be. (Sleeping in, or staying in bed longer than you should, is particularly disruptive to healthy sleep.)

4. Avoid 'blue light' for one hour before bed

Exposure to blue light - from phones, computers, TVs - immediately before bedtime often impairs our ability to get off to sleep. So ideally, avoid looking at these devices *for at least one hour before bedtime.* Ideally, also avoid working or studying, for at least an hour; otherwise, your brain is likely to keep going over it in bed.

5. Create a 'wind-down ritual'

Create your own 'wind-down' ritual to help prepare you for sleep. This may involve listening to relaxing music, reading a relaxing book, having a warm bath or shower, practicing a mindfulness or relaxation technique, or doing any other activity that helps you to 'wind down'.

6. Exercise during the day

Do regular physical **exercise** during the day. Even mild exercise helps - and anything is better than nothing. (Getting out into the sunlight during the day also helps sleep at night.)

But don't exercise vigorously (to the point of sweating) *for at least one hour before bed.*

7. Make your bedroom favourable to sleep

Make your bedroom as conducive to sleep as possible. Keep it clean and tidy and well-aired (not stuffy), and choose a mattress, sheets and pillows that are comfy.

Block out light and noise in the bedroom. Make sure your phone is on silent. If necessary, wear an eyepatch or ear plugs in bed.

Avoid extreme room temperatures. Most people sleep best in room temperatures of approximately 65 degrees Fahrenheit (or within the range of 60 - 67), or 18 degrees Celsius (or within the range of 15.6 to 19.4 C).

8. Limit daytime naps to half an hour or less

Many people find a short half-hour nap in the late afternoon is helpful - but longer naps than that usually impair sleep quality at night.

9. Limit Activities in Bed to Sleep, Sex, Relaxation or Mindfulness

When in bed, limit your activities as much as possible to sex or sleeping. You can also do something relaxing, such as reading a book or listening to peaceful music. You can also practice mindfulness or self-compassion exercises or relaxation techniques.

But don't do things in bed that expose you to blue light (e.g. watching TV, using your phone), or wake you up (e.g. reading a gripping thriller), or tax your brain (e.g. working or studying).

You also want the bedroom itself to be strongly associated with sleep. So avoid doing other forms of activity in the bedroom such as watching TV, working, eating, doing yoga or lifting weights etc.

10. Don't Try To Force Sleep

If you're in bed, and you're not sleeping, trying to make yourself sleep is a recipe for failure. So instead, the idea is to use that time effectively. Instead of tossing and turning and worrying, practice your mindfulness or self-compassion skills. That way, although you're not sleeping, you're learning useful skills that will help you with many other problems.

The good news is, mindfulness and self-compassion practices are usually very restful and restorative - and a much better alternative to tossing, turning, stressing, worrying, and so on. Plus, often when you do these practices in bed, you will eventually fall asleep. That's not the aim of them, but it is a nice bonus. So enjoy this bonus when it happens— and when it doesn't happen, at least you'll get all the other benefits.