

Sleep Hygiene

Poor sleep habits (referred to as hygiene) are among the most common problems encountered in our society. We stay up too late and get up too early. We interrupt our sleep with drugs, chemicals and work, and we overstimulate ourselves with late-night activities such as television.

Nothing is more frustrating than not being able to sleep. Tossing and turning. Your mind is racing, going over everything that happened today. Night noises keep you awake. What can you do? There ARE things you can do! Read on and learn some new tricks to sleep well. These tips are also known as "Sleep Hygiene."

- **Sleep only when sleepy**

This reduces the time you are awake in bed.

- **If you can't fall asleep within 20 minutes, get up and do something boring until you feel sleepy**

Sit quietly in the dark or read the warranty on your refrigerator. Don't expose yourself to bright light while you are up. The light gives cues to your brain that it is time to wake up.

- **Try not to take naps**

This will ensure you are tired at bedtime. If you just can't make it through the day without a nap, sleep less than one hour, before 3 pm.

- **Fix a bedtime and an awakening time.**

Do not be one of those people who allows bedtime and awakening time to drift. The body "gets used" to falling asleep at a certain time, but only if this is relatively fixed. Even if you are retired or not working, and even on weekends - this is an essential component of good sleeping habits.

- **Refrain from exercise at least 4 hours before bedtime**

Regular exercise is recommended to help you sleep well, but the timing of the workout is important. Exercising in the morning or early afternoon will not interfere with sleep. Strenuous exercise within the 2 hours before bedtime, however, can decrease your ability to fall asleep.

- **Develop sleep rituals**

It is important to give your body cues that it is time to slow down and sleep. Listen to relaxing music, read something soothing for 15 minutes, have a cup of caffeine free tea, do relaxation exercises.

- **Only use your bed for sleeping**

Refrain from using your bed to watch TV, pay bills, do work or reading. So when you go to bed your body knows it is time to sleep. Sex is the only exception.

- **Stay away from caffeine, nicotine and alcohol at least 4-6 hours before bed**

Caffeine and nicotine are stimulants that interfere with your ability to fall asleep. Coffee, tea, cola, cocoa, chocolate and some prescription and non-prescription drugs contain caffeine. Cigarettes and some drugs contain nicotine. Alcohol may seem to help you sleep in the beginning as it slows brain activity, but you will end up having fragmented sleep.

- **Have a light snack before bed**

If your stomach is too empty, that can interfere with sleep. However, if you eat a heavy meal before bedtime, that can interfere as well. Dairy products and turkey contain tryptophan, which acts as a natural sleep inducer. Tryptophan is probably why a warm glass of milk is sometimes recommended.

- **Take a hot bath 90 minutes before bedtime**

A hot bath will raise your body temperature, but it is the *drop* in body temperature that may leave you feeling sleepy. Read about the study done on body temperature below.

- **Make sure your bed and bedroom are quiet and comfortable**

A hot room can be uncomfortable. A cooler room along with enough blankets to stay warm is recommended. If light in the early morning bothers you, get a blackout shade or wear a slumber mask. If noise bothers you, wear earplugs.

- **Don't take your worries to bed.**

Leave your worries about job, school, daily life, etc., behind when you go to bed. Some people find it useful to assign a "worry period" during the evening or late afternoon to deal with these issues.

Don't sleep too long!

Avoid oversleeping and lying in the bed for prolonged periods after your sleep is completed. Excessive sleep tends to be fragmented, unrefreshing sleep that leaves people feeling worse- and that may then interfere with the following night of sleep. Some individuals require nine hours of sleep, but in adults, longer requirements in the absence of illnesses are unusual. Naps may be beneficial--but for people on a normal day schedule, they are best taken in the early afternoon, and in most cases, should be restricted to less than one hour.

What if you can't get to sleep or return to sleep?

Realize that frustration and 'trying harder' to fall asleep can be enough to keep anyone awake! The harder one tries, the more elusive sleep becomes. Not caring whether sleep will occur can facilitate its onset. Tell yourself that transient inability to fall asleep should not be frightening, since your body will undoubtedly allow you to fall asleep before lack of sleep would ever become a serious threat to your health.

In short, distract yourself from thinking about your inability to sleep (or any other stresses in your life) Focus instead on things so inherently boring that you probably won't be able to stay awake long enough to think about them for any significant period of time.

Getting Up in the Middle of the Night

Most people wake up one or two times a night for various reasons. If you find that you get up in the middle of night and cannot get back to sleep *within 15-20 minutes*, then do not remain in the bed "trying hard" to sleep. Get out of bed. Leave the bedroom. Read, have a light snack, do some quiet activity, or take a bath. You will generally find that you can get back to sleep 20 minutes or so later. Do not perform challenging or engaging activity such as office work, housework, etc. Do not watch television.

A Word About Television

Many people fall asleep with the television on in their room. Watching television before bedtime is often a bad idea. Television is a very engaging medium that tends to keep people up. We generally recommend that the television not be in the bedroom. At the appropriate bedtime, the TV should be turned off and the patient should go to bed. Some people find that the radio helps them go to sleep. Since radio is a less engaging medium than TV, this is probably a good idea.

Other Factors

- ***Several physical factors are known to upset sleep.*** These include arthritis, acid reflux with heartburn, menstruation, headaches and hot flashes.
- ***Psychological and mental health problems like depression, anxiety and stress are often associated with sleeping difficulty.*** In many cases, difficulty staying asleep may be the only presenting sign of depression. A physician should be consulted about these issues to help determine the problem and the best treatment.
- ***Many medications can cause sleeplessness as a side effect.*** Ask your doctor or pharmacist if medications you are taking can lead to sleeplessness.
- ***To help overall improvement in sleep patterns, your doctor may prescribe sleep medications for short-term relief of a sleep problem.*** The decision to take sleeping aids is a medical one to be made in the context of your overall health picture.
- ***Always follow the advice of your physician and other healthcare professionals.*** The goal is to rediscover how to sleep naturally.