

Sleep Hygiene



Many people experience trouble getting to sleep, staying asleep or waking early and being unable to go back to sleep. Although there are numerous reasons why someone might be struggling with their sleeping patterns, here are a number of general tips that can be used by everyone.

Timing is everything - get up half an hour earlier than you would usually wake up. This may not sound like much fun, but research shows that it is one of the most effective strategies for helping establish better sleeping patterns. No matter how little sleep you've had, get up at your new

waking time for the first few weeks. We have little control over when our body falls asleep, but we can control when we wake up, and by doing this you force your sleep cycles to change.

Go to bed when you are sleepy - make sure you aren't going to bed before you actually feel sleepy. Although it's tempting to feel you "should" go to bed at a certain time, stay up until your body feels like it really does need to sleep.

Get up and move around - if you don't get to sleep within 60 minutes then get up and do something calming or boring until you do feel sleepy.

No clock watching - it's tempting to clock watch through the night, but this tends to reinforce anxiety and negative thoughts such as "now I only have 4 hours left before getting up for work".

Get regular - try and keep to the above principles for getting up and going to sleep **every day**, including weekends and even holidays at first. The regular rhythm will give your body some consistency.

No napping - try and avoid taking any naps, even short ones, during the day. This helps make sure you are tired in the evening. If you can't manage this, make sure it's under an hour and before 3pm.

Sleep rituals - develop your own ritual that reminds your body it's time for bed, such as relaxing stretches or breathing exercises 15 minutes prior to going to bed. Or sit calmly with a small herbal tea (many brands do their own "Bedtime" tea).

Bath time - having a hot bath 1-2 hours before bed raises your body temperature, and then when your body temperature begins to drop again you start to feel sleepy. Research shows that drops in body temperature are associated with feeling sleepy.

Exercise - exercise makes you feel tired. It's best to exercise around 3 hours before going to bed, allowing the body time to metabolise the hormones that are released while you exercise. It also gives your body temperature time to cool down. As with evening baths, this drop in body temperature helps with sleep.

Avoid caffeine and nicotine - tea, coffee, caffeinated drinks, chocolate and some medications all contain caffeine. Both caffeine and nicotine act as stimulants and should be avoided 4-6 hours before going to bed.

Avoid alcohol - avoid any alcohol 4-6 hours before sleeping, as it interrupts quality of sleep. Although alcohol will initially depress the nervous system and make you feel sleepy, after a few hours a rebound effect occurs, making sleep difficult. It also dehydrates the body so you may wake up in the night feeling thirsty.

Beds are for sleeping - ensure your mind associates the bed with sleep, therefore avoid using it to watch TV or work on the computer. Reading a book can be helpful for some.

Environment - it's best to have a dark, quiet, comfortable bedroom that's warm and cosy, but with a little fresh air coming in. Use earplugs and sleep masks, if needed. Darkness triggers our brain to produce melatonin, a hormone that tells our brain it's time to sleep.

Electrical equipment - remove as many sources of electromagnetic radiation from the bedroom as possible, such as TVs, mobiles, radios and computers. Even when turned off they emit a frequency. We are more sensitive to electromagnetic radiation during the night, due to its effect on the pineal gland that produces melatonin. There are devices that can help screen electromagnetic rays, including mats, bed covers etc. Information on this is easily found online.

Eating the right foods – avoid eating large meals just before bed, but also don't go to bed hungry. When we are hungry our bodies release stimulating hormones that keep our blood sugar levels stable. The



ideal is to have an evening meal 3 hours or so before bed, then a small snack 30-60 minutes before going to bed. Ensure your evening meal contains some form of complex carbs, such as sweet potato, legumes, oats, broccoli, greens and various fruits, such as apricots and plums. Alongside this, have foods that are high in the amino acid, tryptophan, which is converted into serotonin and finally melatonin, which is the hormone needed for sleep. Tryptophan-rich foods include almonds, almond milk, sesame, sunflower seeds, chicken, turkey and bananas.

Other foods, such as kiwi fruit, contain melatonin itself and anecdotally, some find that 2 kiwi fruit before bed can help with sleep. This would make an excellent snack just before bed, or if this doesn't sound appealing, have a couple of oat cakes with some hummus. Or try this "Sleep Well" smoothie: ½ a banana, 2-3 almonds or a tsp of tahini, a small handful of frozen cherries and a splash of unsweetened almond milk. Whizz up in a blender and enjoy!

The overactive mind - many people lie awake for hours with their minds racing and filled with worry. One way to help reduce this is to use a meditation CD designed specifically to help you fall asleep. Or try keeping a pad and pen beside the bed, this way if you think of something you need to remember to sort out, you can write it down and then forget about it till morning.

Keep daytime routine - even if you've had a bad night, it is important to get up and try and keep to your planned daytime activities. Avoiding activities and sleeping in can reinforce the problem.

Use a sleep diary - people often feel they have had less sleep than they actually have. Keeping a record can help some people get things in perspective and may then reduce anxiety around lack of sleep. However, this is a short-term measure only as it involves clock watching.

Herbal remedies - valerian tea is well known for its sedative effects. A cup of tea 30 minutes before going to sleep, or a few drops of valerian extract in some water can help with improving sleep quality. Dormeasan by A Vogel is great for helping with sleep, but as with all herbs, you need to check them for contraindications with any medications you may be on, or if you are pregnant, trying for a baby or breast feeding.

Essential oils – lavender in particular can be helpful for relaxing and inducing sleep. You can buy diffusers that you can leave going as you sleep.

Sources and further information: Paul McKenna (2009) I Can Make You Sleep, www.sleepfoundation.org