

HOW TO GET A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP

Your Personal Habits

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, this is an essential component of good sleeping habits.

Avoid napping during the day. If you nap throughout the day, it is no wonder that you will not be able to sleep at night. The late afternoon for most people is a "sleepy time." Many people will take a nap at that time. This is generally not a bad thing to do, provided you limit the nap to 30–45 minutes and can sleep well at night.

Avoid alcohol 4-6 hours before bedtime. Many people believe that alcohol helps them sleep. While alcohol has an immediate sleep-inducing effect, a few hours later as the alcohol levels in your blood start to fall, there is a stimulant or wake-up effect.

Avoid caffeine 4-6 hours before bedtime. This includes caffeinated beverages such as coffee, tea and many sodas, as well as chocolate, so be careful.

Avoid heavy, spicy, or sugary foods 4-6 hours before bedtime. These can affect your ability to stay asleep.

Exercise regularly, but not right before bed. Regular exercise, particularly in the afternoon, can help deepen sleep. Strenuous exercise within the 2 hours before bedtime, however, can decrease your ability to fall asleep.

Your Sleeping Environment

Use comfortable bedding. Uncomfortable bedding can prevent good sleep. Evaluate whether or not this is a source of your problem, and make appropriate changes.

Find a comfortable temperature setting for sleeping and keep the room well ventilated. If your bedroom is too cold or too hot, it can keep you awake. A cool (not cold) bedroom is often the most conducive to sleep.

Block out all distracting noise, and eliminate as much light as possible. If noise bothers you, wear earplugs or get a "white noise" machine. If light in the early morning bothers you, get a blackout shade or wear a slumber mask.

Reserve the bed for sleep and sex. Don't use the bed as an office, workroom or recreation room. Let your body "know" that the bed is associated with sleeping.

Getting Ready For Bed

Try 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.

Practice relaxation techniques before bed. Relaxation techniques such as yoga, deep breathing and others may help relieve anxiety and reduce muscle tension.

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.

Establish a pre-sleep ritual. Pre-sleep rituals, such as a warm bath or a few minutes of reading, can help you sleep.

Get into your favorite sleeping position. If you don't fall asleep within 15–30 minutes, get up, go into another room, and read until sleepy.

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.

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.

Use sunlight to set your biological clock. As soon as you get up in the morning, go outside and turn your face to the sun for 15 minutes.