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SLEEP HYGIENE

10 Simple Tips to Improve Your Sleep

Falling asleep may seem like an impossible dream when you're awake at 3 a.m., but good sleep is more under your control than you might think. Following healthy sleep habits can make the difference between restlessness and restful slumber. Researchers have identified a variety of practices and habits—known as "sleep hygiene"—that can help anyone maximize the hours they spend sleeping, even those whose sleep is affected by insomnia, jet lag, or shift work.

Sleep hygiene may sound unimaginative, but it just may be the best way to get the sleep you need in this 24/7 age. Here are some simple tips for making the sleep of your dreams a nightly reality:

1

Avoid Caffeine, Alcohol, Nicotine, and Other Chemicals that Interfere with Sleep

Caffeinated products decrease a person's quality of sleep.

As any coffee lover knows, caffeine is a stimulant that can keep you awake. So avoid caffeine (found in coffee, tea, chocolate, cola, and some pain relievers) for four to six hours before bedtime. Similarly, smokers should refrain from using tobacco products too close to bedtime.

Although alcohol may help bring on sleep, after a few hours it acts as a stimulant, increasing the number of awakenings and generally decreasing the quality of sleep later in the night. It is therefore best to limit alcohol consumption to one to two drinks per day, or less, and to avoid drinking within three hours of bedtime.

2

Turn Your Bedroom into a Sleep-Inducing Environment

A quiet, dark, and cool environment can help promote sound slumber. Why do you think bats congregate in caves for their daytime sleep? To achieve such an environment, lower the volume of outside noise with earplugs or a "white noise" appliance. Use heavy curtains, blackout shades, or an eye mask to block light, a powerful cue that tells the brain that it's time to wake up. Keep the temperature comfortably cool—between 60 and 75°F—and the room well ventilated. And make sure your bedroom is equipped with a comfortable mattress and pillows. (Remember that most mattresses wear out after ten years.)

Also, if a pet regularly wakes you during the night, you may want to consider keeping it out of your bedroom.

It may help to limit your bedroom activities to sleep and sex only. Keeping computers, TVs, and work materials out of the room will strengthen the mental association between your bedroom and sleep.

3

Establish a Soothing Pre-Sleep Routine

Light reading before bed is a good way to prepare yourself for sleep.

Ease the transition from wake time to sleep time with a period of relaxing activities an hour or so before bed. Take a bath (the rise, then fall in body temperature promotes drowsiness), read a book, watch television, or practice relaxation exercises. Avoid stressful, stimulating activities—doing work, discussing emotional issues. Physically and psychologically stressful activities can cause the body to secrete the stress hormone cortisol, which is associated with increasing alertness. If you tend to take your problems to bed, try writing them down—and then putting them aside.

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- 4** **Go to Sleep When You're Truly Tired**
Struggling to fall asleep just leads to frustration. If you're not asleep after 20 minutes, get out of bed, go to another room, and do something relaxing, like reading or listening to music until you are tired enough to sleep.
- 5** **Don't Be a Nighttime Clock-Watcher**
Staring at a clock in your bedroom, either when you are trying to fall asleep or when you wake in the middle of the night, can actually increase stress, making it harder to fall asleep. Turn your clock's face away from you.

And if you wake up in the middle of the night and can't get back to sleep in about 20 minutes, get up and engage in a quiet, restful activity such as reading or listening to music. And keep the lights dim; bright light can stimulate your internal clock. When your eyelids are drooping and you are ready to sleep, return to bed.
- 6** **Use Light to Your Advantage**
Natural light keeps your internal clock on a healthy sleep-wake cycle. So let in the light first thing in the morning and get out of the office for a sun break during the day.
- 7** **Keep Your Internal Clock Set with a Consistent Sleep Schedule**
Having a regular sleep schedule helps to ensure better quality and consistent sleep.

Going to bed and waking up at the same time each day sets the body's "internal clock" to expect sleep at a certain time night after night. Try to stick as closely as possible to your routine on weekends to avoid a Monday morning sleep hangover. Waking up at the same time each day is the very best way to set your clock, and even if you did not sleep well the night before, the extra sleep drive will help you consolidate sleep the following night. Learn more about the importance of synchronizing the clock in [The Drive to Sleep](#) and [Our Internal Clock](#).
- 8** **Nap Early—Or Not at All**
Many people make naps a regular part of their day. However, for those who find falling asleep or staying asleep through the night problematic, afternoon napping may be one of the culprits. This is because late-day naps decrease sleep drive. If you must nap, it's better to keep it short and before 5 p.m.
- 9** **Lighten Up on Evening Meals**
Eating a pepperoni pizza at 10 p.m. may be a recipe for insomnia. Finish dinner several hours before bedtime and avoid foods that cause indigestion. If you get hungry at night, snack on foods that (in your experience) won't disturb your sleep, perhaps dairy foods and carbohydrates.
- 10** **Balance Fluid Intake**
Drink enough fluid at night to keep from waking up thirsty—but not so much and so close to bedtime that you will be awakened by the need for a trip to the bathroom.