

Tips for a Good Night's Sleep

What are your sleep patterns?

Do you have trouble falling asleep? Do you fall asleep easily, then wake up 5 hours later and can't fall back asleep? Do you wake up several times during the night and have trouble staying asleep? If so, you are one of over 20% of the population who experience some form of insomnia and your sleep may be improved by better sleep habits.

Tips for better daytime habits

- **Do not nap during the day.** If you are having trouble sleeping at night, try not to nap during the day because you will throw off your body clock and make it even more difficult to sleep at night. If you are feeling especially tired, and feel as if you absolutely must nap, be sure to sleep for less than 30 minutes, early in the day.
- **Limit caffeine and alcohol.** Avoid drinking caffeinated or alcoholic beverages for several hours before bedtime. Although alcohol may initially act as a sedative, it can interrupt normal sleep patterns.
- **Don't smoke.** Nicotine is a stimulant and can make it difficult to fall asleep and stay asleep. Many over-the-counter and prescription drugs disrupt sleep.
- **Expose yourself to bright light/sunlight soon after awakening.** This will help to regulate your body's natural biological clock. Likewise, try to keep your bedroom dark while you are sleeping so that the light will not interfere with your rest.
- **Exercise early in the day.** Twenty to thirty minutes of exercise every day can help you sleep, but be sure to exercise in the morning or afternoon. Exercise stimulates the body and aerobic activity before bedtime may make falling asleep more difficult.
- **Check your iron level.** Iron deficient women tend to have more problems sleeping so if your blood is iron poor, a supplement might help your health and your ability to sleep.

Did You Know?

Our body has an internal, natural clock (called our "circadian rhythm") that promotes a regular sleep cycle. Unless disrupted, our body and mind naturally induce sleep and then wake from sleep on a consistent 24-hour cycle. Our sleep needs actually decline from childhood and level off in young adulthood. Individual, normal sleep needs vary from as few as 5 to as many as 10 hours per night (7 to 8 hours is the norm).

Tips for a better sleep environment

- **Make sure your bed is large enough and comfortable.** If you are disturbed by a restless bedmate, switch to a queen- or king-size bed. Test different types of mattresses. Try therapeutic shaped foam pillows that cradle your neck or extra pillows that help you sleep on your side. Get comfortable cotton sheets.
- **Make your bedroom primarily a place for sleeping.** It is not a good idea to use your bed for paying bills, doing work, etc. Help your body recognize that this is a place for rest or intimacy.

- **Keep your bedroom peaceful and comfortable.** Make sure your room is well ventilated and the temperature consistent. And try to keep it quiet. You could use a fan or a "white noise" machine to help block outside noises.
- **Hide your clock.** A big, illuminated digital clock may cause you to focus on the time and make you feel stressed and anxious. Place your clock so you can't see the time when you are in bed.

Tips for a better pre-sleep ritual

- **Keep a regular schedule.** Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time everyday, even on the weekends. Keeping a regular schedule will help your body expect sleep at the same time each day. Don't oversleep to make up for a poor night's sleep – doing that for even a couple of days can reset your body clock and make it hard for you to get to sleep at night.
- **Incorporate bedtime rituals.** Listening to soft music, sipping a cup of herbal tea, etc., cues your body that it's time to slow down and begin to prepare for sleep.
- **Relax for a while before going to bed.** This may include meditation, relaxation and/or breathing exercises, or taking a warm bath before bedtime. Try listening to recorded relaxation or guided imagery programs.
- **Eat only a light snack before bed.** Eating a large, heavy meal can interfere with your normal sleep cycle. Try to make sure you eat dinner at least 2-3 hours before your bedtime.
- **Drink warm milk before bedtime.** In addition to being soothing, milk and dairy products contain tryptophan, a natural sleep enhancer. Plus, the warmth may temporarily increase your body temperature and the subsequent drop may hasten sleep. Other foods which contain tryptophan may also help – see below under "Get up and eat some turkey." for more information about tryptophan.
- **Jot down all of your concerns and worries.** Think about your worries and possible solutions before you go to bed, so you don't need to ruminate in the middle of the night. A journal or "to do" list may be very helpful in letting you put away these concerns until the next day when you are fresh.
- **Go to sleep when you are sleepy.** When you feel tired, go to bed.
- **Avoid "over-the-counter" sleep aids,** and make sure that your prescribed medications do not cause insomnia. There is little evidence that supplements and other over-the-counter "sleep aids" are effective. In some cases, there are safety concerns. Antihistamine sleep aids, in particular, have a long duration of action and can cause daytime drowsiness. Always talk to your doctor or healthcare practitioner about your concerns!

Tips for getting back to sleep

- **Do visualization.** Focus all your attention on your toes or visualize walking down an endless stairwell. Thinking about repetitive or mindless things will help your brain to shut down and adjust to sleep.
- **Get out of bed if unable to sleep.** Go into another room and do something relaxing until you feel sleepy
- **Don't do anything stimulating.** Don't read anything job related or watch a stimulating TV program (commercials and news shows tend to be alerting). Don't expose yourself to bright light. The light gives cues to your brain that it is time to wake up.
- **Get up and eat some turkey.** Turkey contains tryptophan, a major building block for making serotonin, a neurotransmitter, which sends messages between nerve cells and causes feelings of sleepiness. Eating foods containing tryptophan raise the levels of serotonin produced in the body, which in turn increase a person's feeling of sleepiness. It is best to eat tryptophan on an empty stomach. Other foods, besides turkey, that contain a notable amount of tryptophan are: milk, cottage cheese, yogurt, ice cream, chicken, cashews, soya beans and tuna.
- **Consider changing your bedtime.** If you are experiencing sleeplessness or insomnia consistently, think about going to bed later so that the time you spend in bed is spent sleeping. If you are only getting five hours of sleep at night, figure out what time you need to get up and subtract five hours (for example, if you want to get up at 6:00 am, go to bed at 1:00 am). This may seem counterproductive and, at first, you may be depriving yourself of some sleep, but it can help train your body to sleep consistently while in bed. When you are spending all of your time in bed sleeping, you can gradually sleep more, by adding 15 minutes at a time.