

Getting a Good Night's Sleep



If you have trouble sleeping, you're not alone. Researchers conducting sleep studies indicate that lack of sleep is considered a global epidemic. Even people who usually sleep well may have trouble when they're under extra stress or away from home.

Why It's Important to Get Enough Sleep

Although dependent on such factors as genetics and age, most adults need between 7 and 9 hours of sleep a night regularly to function at their best, according to the Cleveland Clinic. Getting too little sleep, even for a night or two, can leave you feeling exhausted, forgetful, irritable, and more likely to make mistakes.

Regular sleep deprivation has also been linked to long-term health consequences, including chronic medical conditions like diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease, as well as depression and lowered immunity, according to the sleep disorder specialists at the Cleveland Clinic.

If you have trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep or want to make sure that you're getting enough rest, the following sleep hygiene tips can help.

Develop Healthy Sleep Habits

Make these steps a regular part of your routine to help you fall asleep and stay asleep.

Go to bed and get up at the same time every day. A predictable schedule will set your "body clock." This refers to your body's circadian rhythm, a process which controls many biological functions within our body, including the release of important hormones into our blood stream.

Have a bedtime routine. Following a routine—such as, brushing your teeth, taking a warm bath, meditating, reading a book—allows you to wind down in the evening, creating a consistency conducive to a good night's sleep. Practice mindfulness or engage in some light stretches to further reduce any stress before bed.

Go to bed when you feel drowsy. Spending extended periods of time lying awake at night isn't helpful if you find you're unable to relax. Learn to recognize your signs of sleepiness and use those as your cue to turn out the lights and go to bed.

Get regular exercise. Daily exercise can help you fall asleep more quickly and sleep more soundly, but exercise too near bedtime can make it harder to fall asleep. Try not to exercise at least three hours before bedtime.

Get natural light each day. Spending time outdoors during the day can support better sleep at night. A 10-minute break in the fresh air can make a big difference.

Watch what—and when—you eat at night. Finish your meal several hours before bedtime and avoid foods that you know upset your stomach. Keep in mind that nicotine and caffeine are stimulants that can make it harder to sleep and alcohol is not conducive to good sleep quality. Ask your doctor to recommend an alternative if you're having trouble sleeping.

Create a Comfortable Sleep Environment

Your bedroom should be conducive to sleep. A few simple changes could make a big difference in helping you get the rest you need.

Keep your bedroom quiet, dark, and comfortable. This will help you to remain calm and have a positive association between your bedroom and sleep. Keep the blinds or curtains closed. If the room is still too light, consider getting blackout curtains or using an eye mask. You may also want to use earplugs or a "white noise" machine to block out some sounds.

Sleep on a comfortable bed. Try to choose a mattress and pillow that are right for you. If the room gets too cold at night, keep an extra blanket nearby.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Limit daytime naps. Short naps can restore your energy and focus, but keep them to 20-30 minutes maximum and no later than mid-afternoon.

Do not watch TV or use electronics in bed. Electronic devices all require focus and attention and will heighten your levels of wakefulness. Research has also highlighted an association between the light that these screens emit, and a disruption in circadian rhythm patterns. Aim to turn off electronics one hour before bed.

Declare the bedroom your sleep haven. Avoid activities other than sleep, such as work or paying bills, so that you'll associate the bedroom only as a place of relaxation.

If you still have trouble sleeping

Many sleep problems are temporary and go away on their own. Others result from physical or emotional health conditions that require medical help. If you have sleep problems that last longer than two weeks, see your health care provider. A doctor can help you identify and treat the problem so you can get the rest you need to do your best every day.

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Jaci Leibovitch, BHK, R.H.N
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