

Healthy Sleep Tips

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The following ten tips can help you achieve sleep and the benefits it provides. These tips are intended for "typical" adults, but not necessarily for children or persons with medical problems.

1. Maintain a regular bed and wake time schedule including weekends.

Our sleep-wake cycle is regulated by a "circadian clock" in our brain and the body's need to balance both sleep time and wake time. A regular waking time in the morning strengthens the circadian function and can help with sleep onset at night. That is also why it is important to keep a regular bedtime and wake-time, even on the weekends when there is the temptation to sleep-in.

2. Establish a regular, relaxing bedtime routine such as soaking in a hot bath or hot tub and then reading a book or listening to soothing music.

A relaxing, routine activity right before bedtime conducted away from bright lights helps separate your sleep time from activities that can cause excitement, stress or anxiety which can make it more difficult to fall asleep, get sound and deep sleep or remain asleep. Avoid arousing activities before bedtime like working, paying bills, engaging in competitive games or family problem-solving. Some studies suggest that soaking in hot water (such as a hot tub or bath) before retiring to bed can ease the transition into deeper sleep, but it should be done early enough that you are no longer sweating or over-heated. If you are unable to avoid tension and stress, it may be helpful to learn relaxation techniques from a counselor. Finally, avoid exposure to bright before bedtime because it signals the neurons that help control the sleep-wake cycle that it is time to awaken, not to sleep.

3. Create an environment that is dark, quiet, comfortable and cool.

Design your sleep environment to establish the conditions you need for sleep – cool, quiet, dark, comfortable and free of interruptions. Also make your bedroom reflective of the value you place on sleep. Check your room for noise or other distractions, including a bed partner's sleep disruptions such as snoring, light, and a dry or hot environment. Consider using blackout curtains, eye shades, ear plugs, "white noise," humidifiers, fans and other devices.

4. Sleep on a comfortable mattress and pillows.

Make sure your mattress is comfortable and supportive. The one you have been using for years may have exceeded its life expectancy – about 9 or 10 years for most good quality mattresses. Have comfortable pillows and make the room attractive and inviting for sleep but also free of allergens that might affect you and objects that might cause you to slip or fall if you have to get up during the night.

5. Use your bedroom only for sleep and sex.

It is best to take work materials, computers and televisions out of the sleeping environment. Use your bed only for sleep and sex to strengthen the association between bed and sleep. If you associate a particular activity or item with anxiety about sleeping, omit it from your bedtime routine. For example, if looking at a bedroom clock makes you anxious about how much time you have before you must get up, move the clock out of sight. Do not engage in activities that cause you anxiety and prevent you from sleeping.

6. Finish eating at least 2-3 hours before your regular bedtime.

Eating or drinking too much may make you less comfortable when settling down for bed. It is best to avoid a heavy meal too close to bedtime. Also, spicy foods may cause heartburn, which leads to difficulty falling asleep and discomfort during the night. Try to restrict fluids close to bedtime to prevent nighttime awakenings to go to the bathroom, though some people find milk or herbal, non-caffeinated teas to be soothing and a helpful part of a bedtime routine.

7. Exercise regularly. It is best to workout at least a few hours before bedtime.

In general, exercising regularly makes it easier to fall asleep and contributes to sounder sleep. However, exercising sporadically or right before going to bed will make falling asleep more difficult. In addition to making us more alert, our body temperature rises during exercise, and takes as much as 6 hours to begin to drop. A cooler body temperature is associated with sleep onset... Finish your exercise at least 3 hours before bedtime. Late afternoon exercise is the perfect way to help you fall asleep at night.

8. Avoid caffeine (e.g. coffee, tea, soft drinks, chocolate) close to bedtime.

Caffeine is a stimulant, which means it can produce an alerting effect. Caffeine products, such as coffee, tea, colas and chocolate, remain in the body on average from 3 to 5 hours, but they can affect some people up to 12 hours later. Even if you do not think caffeine affects you, it may be disrupting and changing the quality of your sleep. Avoiding caffeine within 6-8 hours of going to bed can help improve sleep quality.

9. Avoid nicotine (e.g. cigarettes, tobacco products). Used close to bedtime, it can lead to poor sleep.

Nicotine is also a stimulant. Smoking before bed makes it more difficult to fall asleep. When smokers go to sleep, they experience withdrawal symptoms from nicotine, which also cause sleep problems. Nicotine can cause difficulty falling asleep, problems waking in the morning, and may also cause nightmares. Difficulty sleeping is just one more reason to quit smoking. And never smoke in bed or when sleepy!

10. Avoid alcohol close to bedtime.

Although many people think of alcohol as a sedative, it actually disrupts sleep, causing nighttime awakenings. Consuming alcohol leads to a night of less restful sleep.

If you continue to have sleep problems...

Use a sleep diary and talk to your counselor or physician. Note what type of sleep problem is affecting your sleep or if you are sleepy when you wish to be awake and alert. Try these tips and record your sleep and sleep-related activities in a sleep diary. If problems continue, discuss the sleep diary with your doctor. There may be an underlying cause and you will want to be properly diagnosed. Your doctor will help treat the problem or may refer you to a sleep specialist.

Information provided by the National Sleep Foundation (www.sleepfoundation.org)