



TIPS FOR HEALTHY SLEEP

Good sleep habits or good sleep hygiene, are mostly common sense. But life is very busy and we often don't think about them. Here are some simple tips which may help.



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BEDTIME

Value your bedtime and have the same getting up time during the working week, regardless of sleep.

The body has an internal clock and hormones that control sleepiness and wakefulness. This clock works best if there is a regular sleep routine. When you feel sleepy at bedtime, try not to ignore this by staying up, as this is a window of opportunity for sleep. Going to bed too early can also disturb your sleep.

In the hour before going to bed, it is important to have a relaxing sleep routine to allow you to wind down. This may include any form of “time out” compared with your day e.g. a warm bath, reading quietly or a warm milk drink.

Falling asleep on the couch during the evening reduces your sleep drive and makes it harder to fall asleep when you go to bed.

Caffeine needs to be avoided for at least four hours before going to bed. This includes colas, soft drinks, coffee and tea.

Smoking makes it difficult to go to sleep, so there should be no cigarettes before going to bed or during the night.

Alcohol might help you get to sleep in small amounts but may make it harder to stay asleep. Too much alcohol will make snoring and sleep apnea worse as well.

Stimulating activities should be avoided in the hour before bed such as moderate exercise, computer games, television and movies. Being in brightly lit environments or the blue light of the computer can reduce evening levels of a sleep promoting hormone, melatonin.

MEALTIME

Your body slows down at night. Eating too close to bedtime (less than two hours) makes it difficult to sleep. Eating too late may impact your glucose metabolism.



BED - A PLACE TO LOOK FORWARD TO

Your bed (mattress, pillow and blankets) must be comfortable, warm and restful. Both the temperature of the room and having enough blankets is important - warm hands and feet are essential.

Remove distractions from the bedroom e.g. television, computer, radio and telephone. Any clocks in the bedroom should be covered to avoid clock-watching. If possible, do not allow children and pets to disturb you.

DAYTIME

Exercise is good for sleep, but not just before going to bed. The best times are in the morning and before dinner. It is best to be outside in the early part of the day.

Avoid lying in bed during the day. Using the bedroom to study, watch television, make phone calls and read books makes it harder to sleep as the brain will no longer link the bed with sleep. The bedroom is for sleeping and intimacy only.

CAN'T SLEEP, WON'T SLEEP, WHAT SHALL I DO?

Sleep is not something you can force to happen. If you are not asleep within 20 - 30 minutes of going to bed, get up, go to another darkened room and sit quietly. Boredom can promote sleep!

Do not watch television, use a computer, eat, drink or do household chores. When you feel tired again go back to bed. This helps your mind link bed with sleep - not with being unhappy and not sleeping. Do not look at the clock. No matter what time it is you will have an emotional reaction.

Rest is good- it does not have to be sleep.

MY BRAIN WON'T SWITCH OFF

If you lie awake in bed at night and cannot switch off your thoughts, set aside a “worry time” during the evening. Use this time to think about the day’s events, make plans and possible solutions. Then acknowledge any thoughts and learn to “let them go”.

Keep the hour before bed as your wind down time - develop a routine that prepares your body and mind for sleep. Listen to quiet music or do relaxation. Our thoughts continue all the time, so try to make them calmer by creating a favourite fantasy place or daydreaming of your favourite holiday spot. If other thoughts come in, consider them for a moment and then try to gently replace them with calm thoughts.

HOW MUCH SLEEP DO I NEED?

Most adults need seven to nine hours sleep each day. Younger people have different sleep needs. If you are a poorer sleeper it is important you learn to match time in bed with perceived sleep time to improve sleep quality. If you spend more time in bed, you will be telling your body that it is OK to drift in and out of sleep all night. Going to bed later at night may be the best thing to reduce your time lying awake in bed at night.

If you are taking short afternoon naps (10 - 20 minutes maximum) without any problems, then you might want to keep doing this. However, naps in the evening or dozing in front of the TV can make it harder to get to sleep at night.

YOUR DOCTOR AND MEDICATION

If you are struggling with your sleep, seek advice from your doctor who may refer you to a sleep specialist or psychologist.

Some medications make it easier to get to sleep but others will keep you awake. It is best to take them only when your doctor or pharmacist says so. Sleeping pills can be good when a specific event in your life is making it hard to sleep but they are only a short term fix.

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