

sleep

How sleeping better can improve your health



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SLEEP

Sleep is essential for health and wellbeing. It is considered by scientists and health practitioners to be a pillar of good health and wellbeing, equally important as a healthy diet and an active lifestyle.

It is an essential element of growth and repair within our body, for normal learning and memory, as well as being key to emotional health. Long-term lack of sleep has been linked to increased risk of depression, diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease and reduced lifespan.

Today more than ever, many of us are not getting the amount of sleep we need. So we know it's important, but what can we do to get some more? Better sleep often depends on developing better sleep habits, which are known as good sleep hygiene. Considerable research has gone into developing a set of guidelines and tips which are designed to enhance good sleeping, and there is much evidence to suggest that these strategies can provide long-term solutions to sleep difficulties. Please see the following page for details of these strategies as recommended by the Centre for Clinical Interventions.

HOW MUCH DO YOU NEED?

- > Newborns: 16-20 hours
- > Toddlers: around 11-12 hours
- > Adolescents: around 9 hours
- > Adults: around 7-8 hours
- > Older adults: around 5-8 hours

Note: there are great individual differences in requirements for amount of sleep. The best gauge is how you feel during the day. If you often find yourself feeling tired during the day you may require more sleep or in some cases be sleeping too much. It is about finding the optimal level for your own body.

KEY TAKEAWAYS (that won't effect your waistline)

- > Keep it regular - go to bed and get up at the same time each day
- > Make sleep a priority
- > Minimise alcohol, caffeine and nicotine
- > Don't stay in bed tossing and turning, get up and try again
- > Get regular exercise, but not too close to bedtime
- > Don't stuff yourself or starve yourself
- > Make sure your bedroom is dark, quiet and comfortable
- > Switch off the screens at least an hour before bed
- > Avoid napping during the day if you struggle to sleep at night

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- 1 Get regular.** One of the best ways to train your body to sleep well is to go to bed and get up at more or less the same time every day, even on weekends and days off! This regular rhythm will make you feel better and will give your body something to work from.
- 2 Sleep when sleepy.** Only try to sleep when you actually feel tired or sleepy, rather than spending too much time awake in bed.
- 3 Get up & try again.** If you haven't been able to get to sleep after about 20 minutes or more, get up and do something calming or boring until you feel sleepy, then return to bed and try again. Sit quietly on the couch with the lights off (bright light will tell your brain that it is time to wake up), or read something boring like the phone book. Avoid doing anything that is too stimulating or interesting, as this will wake you up even more.
- 4 Avoid caffeine & nicotine.** It is best to avoid consuming any caffeine (in coffee, tea, cola drinks, chocolate, and some medications) or nicotine (cigarettes) for at least 4-6 hours before going to bed. These substances act as stimulants and interfere with the ability to fall asleep.
- 5 Avoid alcohol.** It is also best to avoid alcohol for at least 4-6 hours before going to bed. Many people believe that alcohol is relaxing and helps them to get to sleep at first, but it actually interrupts the quality of sleep.
- 6 Bed is for sleeping.** Try not to use your bed for anything other than sleeping and sex, so that your body comes to associate bed with sleep. If you use bed as a place to watch TV, eat, read, work on your laptop, pay bills, and other things, your body will not learn this connection.
- 7 No naps.** It is best to avoid taking naps during the day, to make sure that you are tired at bedtime. If you can't make it through the day without a nap, make sure it is for less than an hour and before 3pm.
- 8 Sleep rituals.** You can develop your own rituals of things to remind your body that it is time to sleep - some people find it useful to do relaxing stretches or breathing exercises for 15 minutes before bed each night, or sit calmly with a cup of caffeine-free tea.
- 9 Have a hot bath.** A hot bath 1-2 hours before bedtime can be useful, as it will raise your body temperature, causing you to feel sleepy as your body temperature drops again. Research shows that sleepiness is associated with a drop in body temperature.
- 10 No clock-watching.** Many people who struggle with sleep tend to watch the clock too much. Frequently checking the clock during the night can wake you up (especially if you turn on the light to read the time) and reinforces negative thoughts such as "Oh no, look how late it is, I'll never get to sleep" or "it's so early, I have only slept for 5 hours, this is terrible."
- 11 Use a sleep diary.** This worksheet can be a useful way of making sure you have the right facts about your sleep, rather than making assumptions.
Because a diary involves watching the clock (see point 10) it is a good idea to only use it for two weeks to get an idea of what is going on and then perhaps two months down the track to see how you are progressing.
- 12 Exercise.** Regular exercise is a good idea to help with good sleep, but try not to do strenuous exercise in the 4 hours before bedtime. Morning walks are a great way to start the day feeling refreshed!
- 13 Eat right.** A healthy, balanced diet will help you to sleep well, but timing is important. Some people find that a very empty stomach at bedtime is distracting, so it can be useful to have a light snack, but a heavy meal soon before bed can also interrupt sleep.
Some people recommend a warm glass of milk, which contains tryptophan, which acts as a natural sleep inducer.
- 14 The right space.** It is very important that your bed and bedroom are quiet and comfortable for sleeping. A cooler room with enough blankets to stay warm is best, and make sure you have curtains or an eyemask to block out early morning light and earplugs if there is noise outside your room.
- 15 Keep daytime routine the same.** Even if you have a bad night's sleep and are tired it is important that you try to keep your daytime activities the same as you had planned. That is, don't avoid activities because you feel tired. This can reinforce the insomnia.

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