

How to Get a Good Night's Sleep

Tired of counting sheep?

Sleep is as essential to you as food, air, and water. Yet sometime in your life you may experience difficulty in sleeping (about one in three adults report some degree of insomnia at any one time). If you do have trouble sleeping, several changes in lifestyle can help you regain a satisfactory sleep pattern. Experiment with these helpful strategies offered here.

Five Basic Strategies

1. **Never oversleep**

- Never oversleep because of a poor night's sleep. This is the most crucial rule. Get up at about the same time every day, especially on the morning after you've lost sleep. Sleeping late for just a couple of days can reset your body clock to a different cycle -- you'll be getting sleepy later and waking up later.

2. **Set your body clock**

- Light helps restart your body clock to its active daytime phase. So when you get up, go outside and get some sunlight. Or if that's difficult, turn on all the lights in your room.
- After exposing yourself to light, walk around for a few minutes. The calves of your legs act as pumps and get blood circulating, carrying more oxygen to your brain to help get you going.

3. **Exercise**

- Keep physically active during the day. This is especially important the day after a bad night's sleep. When you sleep less, you should be more active during the day. Being less active is one of the worst things someone with insomnia can do.
- Strenuous exercise (brisk walking, swimming, jogging, squash, etc.) in late afternoon seems to promote more restful sleep. Also, people with insomnia tend to be too inactive a couple of hours before bed. Try some gentle exercise such as a stretching routine.

4. **Do not nap**

- Do not take any naps the day after you've lost sleep. When you feel sleepy, get up and do something: Walk, make the bed, or do your errands.
- While studying, or working get up regularly (every 30 minutes, or more often if necessary) to walk around your room and do a gentle stretch. This movement will increase the flow of oxygen to your brain and help you to be more alert.

5. **Set a bedtime schedule using these two steps:**

- First, try to go to bed at about the same time every night. Be regular. Most people get hungry at 7 a.m., noon, and 6 p.m. because they've eaten at those times for years. Going to bed at about the same time every night can make sleep as regular as hunger.
- Second, go to bed later when you are having trouble sleeping. If you're only getting five hours of sleep a night during your insomnia period, don't go to bed until just five hours before your wake-up time. For instance, if you've been waking up at 7 a.m., don't go to bed until 2 a.m. No naps! Make the time you spend in bed sleep time. Still some insomnia? Go to bed proportionately later. Then, as your time in bed becomes good sleep time, move your going-to-bed time back 15 to 30 minutes a night and do that for a week or so.

This is the opposite of what we want to do: we want to go to bed earlier to make up the lost sleep. Learn to do what many sleep laboratories teach -- go to bed later the night after losing sleep.

Additional Strategies

Develop a bedtime routine

Stop watching TV/studying/going on devices and don't get into any stimulating discussions or activities a half hour or hour before bed. Do something that's relaxing -- read "light" material, play your guitar, listen to music that is quiet. Some people sleep better in a clean and neat environment, so they like to straighten and clean their room just before going to bed. Find your own sleep-promoting routine.

Warm bath, yes; shower, no

Take a long, hot bath before going to bed. This helps relax and soothe your muscles. Showers, on the other hand, tend to wake you up. People with insomnia should avoid showers in the evening.

List "gotta do's"

Keep a pad and pencil handy. If you think of something you want to remember, jot it down. Then let the thought go. There will be no need to lie awake worrying about remembering it.

Stretch and relaxation

Some people find that a gentle stretching routine for several minutes just before getting into bed helps induce sleep. Others practice relaxation techniques. Libraries or bookstores have books on developing stretching or relaxation routines.

To eat or not to eat

Some sleep centers recommend a light breakfast and lunch to help you stay alert during the day. They advise you to make the evening meal the major meal of the day. Schedule it at least four hours before bedtime so your digestive system will be reasonably quiet by the time you're ready to sleep.

Warm milk?

It helps some people to have a glass at bedtime. Milk has an essential amino acid, tryptophan, which stimulates the brain chemical serotonin, believed to play a key role in inducing sleep. A piece of whole wheat bread, or another carbohydrate, enhances the effect. Or try taking tryptophan, beginning with about two grams about an hour before bedtime. A piece of wheat bread will help the tryptophan to be absorbed.

Avoid caffeine and tyrosine-rich foods from late afternoon on

Caffeine, a chemical in coffee, colas, tea, chocolate, etc., causes hyperactivity and wakefulness. Some sleep laboratories encourage people to avoid such tyrosine-laden foods as fermented cheeses (cheddar is about the worst; cottage cheese and yogurt are OK), ripe avocados, some imported beers, and fermented meats (bologna, pepperoni, salami). Also avoid red wines, especially chianti.

Cut down on alcohol

Alcohol might help you get to sleep, but it results in shallow and disturbed sleep, abnormal dream periods, and frequent early morning awakening.

Is Your Environment Conducive To Sleep?

Room temperature

Sleep in a cool room (17 degrees or so). Pile on another blanket or add one under the mattress pad rather than turn up the heat.

Humidity

Even a little thing like a dry throat may make sleeping more difficult. Most heating systems dry the air in your bedroom, so borrow a humidifier to see if it will help. Keeping heat down and having a window open can also keep humidity up.

Noise

Some people seem to sleep better if there is a white noise -- a fan running, for example -- in the background. For others, noise can interrupt sleep.

In addition to the fan strategy, try particular kinds of music to blot out the noise. Play a recording of music that has no words, no definite melody, and not a lot of change in the volume. Baroque music is a good choice. There are many tapes of sounds that aid sleep by quieting the mind, emotions, and body.

If desperate, you might try ear plugs that workers use on noisy jobs.

Worrying about insomnia?

Focusing on insomnia might make it worse. After all, you won't die from it! It is frequently a symptom of something else; excessive worry or anxiety about work, school, money, relationships, etc. If you think a particular worry might be keeping you awake, get up, find paper and a pencil, and jot down something you can do about that worry tomorrow. Put the note where you'll see it when you wake up. You can set aside your worry and use the remainder of the night for restful sleep. If necessary, use the strategies already described to get back into a regular sleep pattern.

In bed and unable to sleep?

If you are in bed and unable to sleep, many experts suggest getting completely out of bed, sitting in a chair, and reading, writing letters, or doing some quiet activity. As you get sleepy, go back to bed and use a relaxation technique to fall asleep. Make your bed a place to sleep, not a place to get other things done.

Don't get mad at yourself! Try not to worry about not sleeping. Your body's wisdom will take over and you'll begin sleeping regularly as long as you use the five basic strategies described earlier.

Exercising?

The role of exercise cannot be stressed enough! Adding regular exercise -- brisk walking, riding an exercise bike (perhaps while watching TV) and swimming -- has helped many people sleep better. The more active your body is during the day, the more likely it is that you'll be able to go to sleep when it's time for your body to be quiet. Quiet time for sleep needs to be a contrast to a more active day.

Waking up at night?

What should you do when you're awake after just two, three, or four hours of sleep? Get out of bed, read, write letters, or do some quiet activity. Reactions to the stresses of everyday life can result in a level of sleep that is easily interrupted however; a good stress-management program can help.

Do not drink, eat, or smoke when you wake up. If you do, you'll find yourself waking up for them after just three or four nights of such treats.

Awake 4 or 5 a.m? Now what?

Get up and begin the day. If you're rested, you've probably had enough sleep and have a head start on most people. If you're still tired, get up anyway and go through the day, avoiding naps. Start the routines suggested in the basic strategies.

Build an exercise program and stress-management training into your life. By learning to be less stressed during the day, you also learn to sleep better at night.

Not managing stress very well?

Difficulty in effectively managing normal, everyday stress in life is a common problem. A frequent reaction to daily stresses is insomnia, either sleep-onset insomnia or sleep-interrupting insomnia. A good stress-management program helps you learn how to manage those frequent stressors and go more easily through each day. You can also find out about stress-management programs from your local guidance and mental health centers, extension agencies, and family physicians. More and more hospitals are offering such programs to help people develop healthier lifestyles.

How Much Sleep do You Need?

Sleep needs vary from person to person. Some need only four hours per night, but others seem to need 10. Some people complain because they sleep "only" five or six hours each night. Yet many of these people awake rested in the morning and function well during the day. Five or six hours of sleep is all they need most of the time. They don't have insomnia.

Other people feel tired after eight hours of sleep. They need more than the "normal" seven to eight hour average. Just one more hour of sleep often gives these people the rest they need. Experiment to find the amount of sleep you need.

Remember, too, that the amount of sleep you need will vary. Your need for sleep may decrease and your ability to go to sleep may improve when you are exercising regularly and doing things you enjoy and do easily. You may need more sleep and experience more sleeplessness if you are under more stress or as you become less active (e.g., move from an active to a sedentary job)