

Sleep Hygiene: Tips for a Good Night's Sleep (NINDS, 2001; NIA, 2002)

Set a schedule:

Go to bed at a set time each night and get up at the same time each morning, even on weekends and holidays. Disrupting this schedule may lead to insomnia. "Sleeping in" on weekends also makes it harder to wake up early on Monday morning because it re-sets your sleep cycles for a later awakening.

Develop a bedtime routine:

Do the same things each night to tell your body that it's time to wind down. Some people watch the evening news, read a book, or soak in a warm bath.

Exercise:

Try to exercise 20 to 30 minutes a day; try to exercise at approximately the same time each day. Daily exercise often helps people sleep, although a workout soon before bedtime may interfere with sleep. For maximum benefit, try to get your exercise at least 4 to 6 hours before going to bed.

Be careful of what you eat and drink:

Avoid drinks that contain caffeine, which acts as a stimulant and keeps people awake. Sources of caffeine include coffee, chocolate, soft drinks, non-herbal teas, diet drugs, and some pain relievers.

Be careful with prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) medications:

Some OTC pain-relieving medications contain caffeine-be sure to check the labels. Be aware that certain prescription medicines, such as those for asthma, some antidepressants, and anti-anxiety drugs may cause insomnia.

Be careful not to rely on over-the-counter herbs, or other sleep-promoting substances whose safety and effectiveness have not been determined.

Avoid nicotine and alcohol:

Smoking is dangerous for many reasons including the hazard of falling asleep with a lit cigarette.

Avoid smoking, especially before bedtime; nicotine can disrupt sleep and reduce total hours slept. Smokers report far greater sleepiness and minor accidents than do nonsmokers.

Smokers tend to sleep very lightly and often wake up in the early morning due to nicotine withdrawal. Nicotine is also a stimulant.

Don't use alcohol for at least 2 hours before bedtime. It may make you drowsy at first, but after a few hours it can disrupt sleep. Alcohol robs people of deep sleep and REM sleep and keeps them in the lighter stages of sleep.

Relax before bed:

A warm bath, reading, or another relaxing routine can make it easier to fall asleep. You can train yourself to associate certain restful activities with sleep and make them part of your bedtime ritual.

The anxiety of being unable to fall asleep can actually contribute to insomnia. Try not to worry about your sleep. Some people find that playing mental games is helpful. For example, think black - a black cat on a black velvet pillow on a black corduroy sofa, etc.; or tell yourself it is 5 minutes before you have to get up and you're just trying to get a few extra winks (NIA, 2002).

Sleep until sunlight:

If possible, wake up with the sun, or use very bright lights in the morning. Sunlight helps the body's internal biological clock reset itself each day. Some sleep experts recommend exposure to an hour of morning sunlight for people having problems falling asleep.

Use bed for select activities:

Use your bedroom only for sleeping and sex. Don't use the bedroom to pay bills, watch television, or discuss the problems of the day. After turning off the light, give yourself about 15 minutes to fall asleep. If you are still awake and not drowsy, get out of bed. When you get sleepy, go back to bed (NIA, 2002).

Don't lie in bed awake:

If you can't get to sleep, don't just lie in bed, get up and move around. Go to another room and read, watch television or listen to music until you feel tired. Don't take sleeplessness lying down.

Create a safe and comfortable place to sleep:

Control your room temperature, maintaining an even comfortable temperature in the bedroom. Extreme temperatures may disrupt sleep or prevent you from falling asleep.

Reduce noise with sound attenuation measures, noise screening with background "white noise", or wearing earplugs (Rogers, 1997).

Make sure there are locks on all doors and smoke alarms on each floor. A lamp that's easy to turn on and a phone by your bed may be helpful. The room should be dark, well ventilated, and as quiet as possible.

Daytime naps/rest:

Take a short nap during the day if you're tired, but keep it brief and do it early in the day.

Take a rest break if you feel tired while driving. Fresh air or loud music won't keep you alert, but a short nap may do the trick, especially if you combine it with caffeine.

See your healthcare provider if your sleeping problem continues:

If you have trouble falling asleep night after night, or if you always feel tired the next day, then you may have a sleep disorder and should see your healthcare provider. Your healthcare provider may be able to help you; if not, you can probably find a sleep specialist at a major hospital near you. Most sleep disorders can be treated effectively, so you can finally get that good night's sleep you need.

See your healthcare provider for any medical conditions affecting your quality or quantity of sleep, such as arthritis, bronchitis, asthma, certain heart problems, hormone disorders such as hyperthyroidism, and sleep-related disorders like RLS and sleep apnea.

If you are so tired during the day that you cannot function normally and if this lasts for more than 2 to 3 weeks, you should see your healthcare provider or a sleep disorders specialist.

Sleep: Everything You Always Wanted to Know but Were Too Tired To Ask