

## Ten Tips for a Better Night's Sleep

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When we crawl into bed and sleep for seven or eight uninterrupted hours, we tend to wake up feeling refreshed, energetic, and ready to face the day. **BUT.** If you're one of the thousands of people who wake up at 2am and can't fall back asleep, or you simply can't get to sleep at all, help is at hand! Sleep specialists have identified concrete steps you can take - known as 'sleep hygiene' - to get a good night's sleep, even if you have jet lag, insomnia, or repeated graveyard shifts at work.

These ten healthy sleep habits can turn your restless nights into peaceful slumber:

### 1. Create a sleep-inducing environment in your bedroom.

A quiet, cool, and dark space helps promote peaceful sleep. Try to lessen the volume of outside noise, wear earplugs or a 'white noise' appliance that promotes relaxation. Use blackout shades or heavy curtains to block out the light. Wear an eye mask to help you rest. Keep a cool temperature, between 60 and 75°F, and keep your room well-ventilated.

Choose comfortable mattresses and pillows; most mattresses wear out after ten years.

If possible, keep electronics, including computers and televisions out of the bedroom.

### 2. Choose the right sheets.

Just as certain clothing feels good against your skin, bedding material has similar power and can greatly affect your quality of sleep. Some fabrics are cooler than others; synthetics tend to trap heat, and can make sleeping uncomfortable. Good quality cotton like Egyptian and pima gets rave reviews. Menopausal? Choose moisture-wicking sheets for coolness. Plus:

- Wash and soften new sheets before you use them, as irritants can get into the packaging. Clean your sheets every seven to ten days.
- If you have sensitive skin, choose detergents free from perfumes and dyes. Look for the OEKO-TEX certification, which ensures no toxic chemicals were used during manufacturing.
- Get seasonal. Use jersey or cotton flannel in the winter and lighter bedding in the summer.
- Treat yourself to new bedding 18 to 24 months; it just looks and feels better. Any fabric, washed repeatedly in hot water will start to fade. Feeling frugal? Buy some new pillowcases.

### 3. Avoid caffeine, nicotine, alcohol and other chemicals before bed.

Keep your daily caffeine ritual for the morning. Caffeine is a stimulant that will keep you awake. Avoid caffeine – found in coffee, tea, soda, chocolate, and some pain medicine – for four to six hours before bedtime. Smokers, too should avoid tobacco products too close to sleep time.

Alcohol may help induce sleep, but after several hours it has the reverse effect and acts like a stimulant, making you wake up often during the night. It's best to not drink more than one or two drinks per day, and not to drink within three hours of bedtime.

#### **4. Establish a soothing, pre-sleep routine.**

Transition from 'wake time' to 'sleep time' with easy, relaxing activities an hour or so before bed. Treat yourself to a bubble bath, watch something calm on television, read a book, or practice relaxation exercises, like visualization or deep breathing. Avoid stimulating actions, like doing work or discussing emotional issues. Stressful activities increase cortisol (see #10, below), which keeps you awake. If you're beset with problems, try writing them down, and then put the notebook away.

#### **5. Go to sleep when you are truly tired.**

Struggling hard to fall asleep is frustrating. If you turn off the lights but aren't sleeping after 20 minutes, get up, go into another room and do something relaxing; try listening to music or reading a magazine until you feel tired enough to go back to bed and fall asleep.

#### **6. No watching the clock!**

We tend to stare at the clock when we can't sleep, which increases stress and makes it that much harder to fall asleep. Turn your clock's face away from you. Cover it with a towel!

#### **7. Be consistent.**

Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time every day: this helps to set your body's 'internal clock' which will expect it to sleep at said time night after night. Stick to it, too, on weekends.

#### **8. Go easy on your nighttime food intake.**

Eating spicy Chinese food at 9pm may promote insomnia. Eat your evening meal several hours before you go to bed and avoid food that causes indigestion. Should you get hungry late at night, snack on foods that don't bother your sleep; perhaps dairy or carbohydrates. See what works for your own unique metabolism.

#### **9. Balance your fluid intake.**

Drink enough liquids at night – preferably water – to keep you from waking up thirsty, but not so much close to bedtime that you get up mid-night (more than once!) to go to the bathroom.

#### **10. Watch when you exercise.**

Though exercise can help you fall asleep and sleep soundly, it also stimulates the body to secrete cortisol, a stress hormone which activates your brain's alert mechanism. This is all well and good, unless you're trying to fall asleep! Try to work out earlier in the day, or to finish your exercise at least three hours before bedtime.

If you have a clinical sleep problem like sleep apnea, narcolepsy or restless leg syndrome you should consult a physician. Otherwise, try to incorporate some of these sleep hygiene tips into your daily and nighttime routines, and stick with them. You could very well find your sleep patterns improving, and begin to achieve consistent, uninterrupted, restful sleep.