

Getting Better Sleep

Sleep gives the body time to repair itself and gain energy for the next day. Just as good sleep can maintain your health, poor sleep can jeopardize it. Research links sleep problems to reduced antibody levels, obesity, and other health problems. Research also shows that young adults that get the least amount of sleep get lower grades in college than those that get more sleep. This is because tired individuals can't remember what they just learned. Sleep loss decreases the body's ability to extract glucose from the blood stream. Without this stream of basic energy, the region of the brain that is responsible for important higher level functions suffers. These functions include the ability to pay attention, memory, moral reasoning, impulse control, judgment and motivation. According to Harvard sleep researcher Robert Stickgold students remember 2½ times more information 12 hours later if they study right before a good night of sleep than if they study in the morning. Deep sleep allows for dreaming and dreaming allows for the psychological digestion of positive and negative thoughts that occur during the day. Distressing dreams are normal after a traumatic event and are part of the natural healing process and their frequency and intensity should taper off within weeks of the event. There are two regions of the brain that process intense emotions and thoughts from the day. Research shows that chronically sleep-deprived young adults have disrupted memory recall. In these individuals the brain fails to recall pleasant memories in the following days, weeks and months, yet it is able to recall gloomy memories just fine; and over time this disrupted memory pattern can lead to clinical depression.

Consider the following:

- Avoid stimulants. Do not drink caffeinated coffee within four hours of bedtime. Many sodas also have caffeine. Nicotine is a potent stimulant; so if you smoke, which you know you shouldn't, don't do so within two hours of bedtime. Try drinking tart cherry juice which is known to increase levels of melatonin, the hormone associated with sleep onset. Melatonin tablets and valerian teas are natural sedatives with no addictive qualities.
- Exercise is beneficial to sleep as well as one's overall health. But its best to work out in the daytime. Exercise increases body temperature and the metabolic process rate, which makes it more difficult to fall asleep. Exercising before or shortly after dinner will allow for a gradual slowdown in your metabolism all evening until it hits a stage of sleepiness at just about bedtime.
- Eating too close to bedtime may cause digestive problems and may physiologically delay the start of deep sleep. Heavy meals, sugary, spicy, or overly fatty foods can cause acid reflux and other digestive problems which can make sleep physically uncomfortable. Finish eating dinner at least two to three hours before you go to bed. During the Rapid Eye Movement (REM) phases of sleep, where major benefits of sleep come into play, almost all of the energy in your body is directed to your brain. If there is food in your stomach your body has to work on digesting that food before it can apply its full energy to the first REM phase of sleep.
- While alcohol initially acts as a sedative don't use alcohol as a method to fall asleep. Alcohol relaxes tissue at the back of your throat and expands blood vessels in your nose both of which constricts breathing and exacerbates snoring. If you share a bed with a loved one, snoring disrupts a sleep partner and their disrupted sleep can, in turn, negatively impact your sleeping. Alcohol often wakes you up prematurely with the need to urinate. Furthermore, alcohol (snoring and premature urination) disrupts normal sleep patterns and inhibits adequate amounts of REM and other deep stages of sleep, all of which can cause you to wake up not feeling restored.
- Stick to a schedule. As tempting as it is to stay up late and sleep in on weekends, staying near the same time every day (including weekends) can make all your sleep more restful and evenly balanced. After a period of several days (of regular sleep and wake times) most people get into a rhythm whereby they can wake up around the same time and without an alarm clock. As noted above, college students should allocate study times to late afternoon and evening hours. Taking

a nap in between study sessions is helpful, and even desirable according to Stickgold, but limit naps to mid-afternoon; early enough that the nap won't interfere with nighttime sleep.

- Establish some bedtime routines. For example, eat a light bedtime snack, write in a journal, do some leisurely reading, listen to quiet music, or do some other relaxing activity that helps you to unwind and be mentally ready to go to sleep. Try taking a hot shower or bath as the warm temperature heats you up and, as you cool, your sedentary body relaxes and is ready for sleep.
- Sleep in a dark, quiet, and temperate environment. Do what you can to keep light at a minimum because light triggers your body to stop producing melatonin. Your TV, computer screen and cell phone emit a bright blue light. As you're winding down activate the warmer night mode setting your device an hour or two before your planned bedtime. If you have to get up, turn on the dimmest light in the bathroom, etc. that will allow you to move around safely. Avoid opening and staring into the refrigerator in the middle of the night. Most people sleep deeper in cool environments (around 65 degrees) with warm blankets. In the winter use a humidifier or cool air vaporizer to reduce dry itchy skin, dry mouth, dry nose, and related breathing difficulties. Consider the use of an internal nasal dilator or external nasal strips.
- Reduce your stress and emotional arousal at bedtime. Turn off your cell phone (or switch it to silent mode) at bedtime. If you have a friend who needs advice around the time of your planned bedtime, ask them to call you in the morning. Also avoid getting into conflicts with important people at the end of the night on the phone or computer. Watching TV is not an optimal way to relax especially if you watch the evening news or a crime/drama show just before bedtime because disturbing content, images or news may be emotionally arousing, linger in your mind, and keep you awake. Going to bed fretting about a problem not only delays sleep but also makes sleep less restful. It's better to figure out a solution to a problem or worry about a problem much earlier in the evening. If you lie awake for more than 15 minutes; worrying, for example, that you might forget to do something the next day, get up and write down concerns on a pad of paper. It often helps to shut down a racing mind if there are plans to address those concerns the next day. Then go back to bed and turn the clock so you don't see the time and fret over the time you're spending awake. Now imagine a pleasant visual scene or experience, concentrate on that and hold it in your mind as long as you can. Keep doing this until you naturally fall asleep. Another calming method is to listen to a relaxation app or mindfulness/meditation sound track.
- Getting outside light in the morning is very effective in helping you to wake up. Sleep near a window and angle the window blinds open for morning sunshine. Inside light doesn't work as well at waking you up in the morning as does outside light; even a cloudy day is about 1,000 times stronger than indoor lighting. In the winter it may still be dark outside when you get up so the next best thing is to turn on a bright light. Place your wake up device in a spot that requires you to get out of bed to turn it off. Don't return to bed as there is no benefit to snoozing.
- If you are regularly forcing yourself out of bed sooner than you feel ready to do so it's a sign that you're not getting enough sleep. Pick a bedtime that will allow at least 7 to 8 hours of sleep each day (or what is needed to make you feel fully rested in the morning and ready to start your day). Being just an hour or two short of quality sleep can make you feel exhausted throughout the day, less able to focus, and less able to function fully at work or learn in school.
- If you're still having problems falling asleep, sleeping soundly, and/or getting out of bed in the morning on a chronic basis your body may be telling you something isn't right about the way you're managing your life. Consider the idea of seeing a mental health professional, or arrange to see a medical professional who specializes in sleep problems.