

# Sleep Hygiene

## Helpful Hints to Help You Sleep

*Poor sleep habits are among the most common problems encountered in our society. We stay up too late and get up too early. We interrupt our sleep with drugs, chemicals and work. We also overstimulate ourselves with late-night activities, such as television. Below are some essentials of good sleep habits, referred to as “sleep hygiene.” Many of these points will seem like common sense, but it is surprising how many of these important points are ignored by many of us.*

### Your Personal Habits:

- › **Fix a bedtime and a time to wake.** Do not be one of those people who allows bedtime and waking up to drift. The body “gets used” to falling asleep at a certain time, but only if this is relatively fixed. Even if you are retired or not working, this is an essential component to good sleeping habits.
- › **Avoid or limit napping during the day.** If you nap throughout the day, it is no wonder that you will not be able to sleep at night. The late afternoon for most people is a sleepy time. Many people will take a nap at that time. This is generally not a bad thing to do, provided you limit the nap to 30-45 minutes and can sleep well at night.
- › **Avoid alcohol 4-6 hours before bedtime.** Many people believe that alcohol helps them sleep. While alcohol has an immediate sleep-inducing effect, a few hours later, as the alcohol levels in your blood start to fall, there is a stimulant or wake-up effect.
- › **Avoid caffeine 4-6 hours before bedtime.** This includes caffeinated beverages such as, coffee, tea and many sodas as well as chocolate, so be careful.
- › **Avoid heavy, spicy or sugary foods 4-6 hours before bedtime.** These can affect your ability to stay asleep.
- › **Exercise regularly, but not right before bed.** Regular exercise, particularly in the afternoon, can help deepen sleep. Strenuous exercise within the two hours before bedtime, however, can decrease your ability to fall asleep.

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## Your Sleeping Environment:

- › **Use comfortable bedding.** Uncomfortable bedding can prevent good sleep. Evaluate whether this is a source of your problem, and make appropriate changes.
- › **Find a comfortable temperature setting for sleeping and keep the room well-ventilated.** If your bedroom is too cold or too hot, it can keep you awake. A cool (not cold) bedroom is often the most conducive for sleep.
- › **Block out any sleep distractions.** Eliminate distracting noises and as much light as possible.
- › **Reserve the bed for sleep and sex.** Don't use the bed as an office, workroom or recreation room. Let your body "know" that the bed is associated with sleeping.

## Getting Ready for Bed:

- › **Try a light snack before bed.** Warm milk and foods high in the amino acid tryptophan, such as bananas, may help you sleep.
- › **Practice relaxation techniques before bed.** Relaxation techniques such as, yoga, deep breathing and others, may help relieve anxiety and reduce muscle tension.
- › **Don't take your worries to bed.** Leave your worries about work, school and daily life behind when you go to bed. Some people find it useful to assign a "worry period" during the evening or late afternoon to deal with these issues.
- › **Establish a presleep ritual.** Presleep rituals, such as a warm bath or a few minutes of reading, can help you sleep.
- › **Get into your favorite sleeping position.** If you don't fall asleep within 15-30 minutes, get up, go into another room and read until sleepy.

## Getting Up in the Middle of the Night

Most people wake up one or two times a night for various reasons. If you find that you get up in the middle of the night and cannot get back to sleep within 15-20 minutes, then do not remain in the bed "trying hard" to sleep. Get out of bed and leave the bedroom. Read, have a light snack, do a quiet activity or take a bath. You will generally find that you can get back to sleep 20 minutes or so later. Do not watch television or perform challenging or engaging activities such as office work or housework.

## A Word About Television and Computers

Many people fall asleep with the television on in their room. Watching television or using a computer before bedtime is often a bad idea, as doing so tends to keep people up. We generally recommend removing televisions or computers from the bedroom. At the appropriate bedtime, the TV or computer should be turned off. Some people find that the radio helps them go to sleep. Since the radio is a less engaging medium than a TV or computer, this is more acceptable.

## Other Factors:

- › Several physical factors are known to upset sleep. These include arthritis, acid reflux with heartburn, menstruation, headaches and hot flashes.
- › Psychological and mental health problems like depression, anxiety and stress are often associated with difficulty sleeping. In many cases, difficulty staying asleep may be the only presenting sign of depression. A physician should be consulted about these issues to help determine the problem and the best treatment.
- › Many medications can cause sleeplessness as a side effect. Ask your doctor or pharmacist if medications you are taking can lead to sleeplessness.
- › To help overall improvement in sleep patterns, your doctor may prescribe sleep medications for short-term relief of a sleep problem. The decision to take sleeping aids is a medical one to be made in the context of your overall health picture.
- › Always follow the advice of your physician and other health care professionals. The goal is to rediscover how to sleep naturally.

*Source: University of Maryland Sleep Disorders Center*

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