

Sleep Hygiene

Just like any other part of basic self-care, your sleep behavior could also benefit from hygiene. Your sleep environment, afternoon and evening activities, coping behaviors, and sleep routine are all part of good sleep hygiene.

Maintain a regular sleep schedule:

- **Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day (+/- 20 minutes), even on weekends and holidays.** This should help regulate your body's clock and enhance the quality of your sleep and wake time.
- If possible, **avoid naps.** If you have to take a nap, try to keep it to less than one hour and avoid taking a nap after 3 p.m. Naps decrease the 'Sleep Debt' that is so necessary for easy sleep onset. Each of us needs a certain amount of sleep per 24-hour period. We need that amount, and we don't need more than that. When we take naps, it decreases the amount of sleep that we need the next night – which may cause sleep fragmentation and difficulty initiating sleep, and may lead to insomnia.

Your evening and bedtime routine:

- Practice **relaxation techniques** before bedtime.
 - ◆ Deep breathing and visualization of a soothing scene.
 - ◆ Take a warm shower or bath about 90 minutes before bed. A hot bath will raise your body temperature, and it is the *drop* in body temperature that may leave you feeling sleepy.
 - ◆ Listen to soothing music.
 - ◆ Drink a cup of non-caffeinated tea.
 - ◆ Have a light snack, but avoid eating heavy meals near bedtime.
- **Wait until you are sleepy** before going to bed. If you're not sleepy at your regular bedtime, try to relax your body and distract your mind. Avoid exciting books or television that wakes you up.

Preparing the mind for sleep:

- **Reduce stress.** If you're worried about getting your work done, make a to-do list for the next day to assure yourself you have enough time to accomplish what needs to get done. Once the chores that cause you stress are down on paper, your mind is free to relax and think more pleasant thoughts.
 - ◆ **If you are worried, get out of bed.** Write down your worries, make a list, put it aside. The bed is a place for rest, not worry.
- **Unglue yourself from false or anxious beliefs about sleep**, such as the idea that a single restless night will make you sick.
- Try to **avoid emotionally upsetting conversations** and activities before trying to go to sleep. Don't dwell on or bring your problems to bed.

Preparing the body for sleep:

- **Avoid caffeine after lunch.** The effects of caffeine may last for several hours after ingestion. Caffeine is a stimulant and reaches its peak effect in the first hour but with a half-life elimination of 3-7 hours. Caffeine is a potent sleep inhibitor and it increases sleep latency, night waking, decreases total sleep time, decreases slow-wave sleep, and impairs overall sleep quality. Remember, chocolate has caffeine, too.
- **Don't go to bed hungry or full.** If your stomach is too empty, that can interfere with sleep. However, if you eat a heavy meal before bedtime, that can interfere as well. Dairy products, turkey, and tuna contain tryptophan, which acts as a natural sleep inducer. Tryptophan is probably why a warm glass of milk is sometimes recommended. Dietary changes can also cause sleep problems, so make gradual changes if possible.
- **Avoid alcohol of any type within six hours of your bedtime.** Alcohol creates the illusions of good sleep but the architecture of sleep is affected adversely. Sleep is fragmented with deep sleep initially and a rebound of REM sleep later.
- **Do not smoke or ingest nicotine within two hours of your bedtime.**
- **Exercise regularly, but avoid strenuous exercise within six hours of your bedtime.** Exercise promotes continuous sleep. However, rigorous exercise circulates endorphins into the body which may cause difficulty initiating sleep.
- Ensure adequate **exposure to natural light** during the day. Light exposure helps maintain a healthy sleep-wake cycle.
- **Avoid sleeping pills, or use them cautiously.** Always use sleeping pills as prescribed by your physician.

Your sleeping area:

- Remove all TVs, computers, and other “gadgets” from the bedroom.
- Use your bedroom only for sleeping and sex (if that's right for you). The bedroom, and more importantly the bed, is not a place for watching TV, eating, chatting, working, etc.
- Keep your bedroom quiet, dark, and cool. Use curtains or blinds to block out light.
- If noise bothers you, consider wearing earplugs or using soothing music, a fan, or a "white noise" machine to block out noise.
- If you are a 'clock watcher' at night, hide the clock.
- Use a sleep mask and earplugs, if light and noise bother you.
- Extreme heat or cold should be avoided. A hot room can be uncomfortable. A cooler room along with enough blankets to stay warm is recommended.

- If light in the early morning bothers you, get a blackout shade or wear a slumber mask.
- If you need light, use off-light such as a night light in the bathroom or hallway.
- If your pets awaken you, keep them outside the bedroom.

If you can't fall asleep:

- **If you are not asleep after 20 minutes**, leave your bedroom and find something else that will relax you enough to help make you sleepy. **Don't stay in bed awake for more than 5-10 minutes.**
 - ♦ This is called **sleep restriction**. Lying in bed when you're awake can become a habit that leads to poor sleep. Limiting the amount of time you spend in bed can make you sleepier when you do go to bed. That way you're more likely to fall asleep and stay asleep.
- If you find your mind racing, or worrying about not being able to sleep during the middle of the night, get out of bed, and sit in a chair in the dark. Do your mind racing in the chair until you are sleepy, then return to bed. No TV or internet during these periods! That will just stimulate you more than desired.
 - ♦ If this happens several times during the night, that is OK. Just maintain your regular wake time, and try to avoid naps.
- Sit quietly in the dark or read the warranty on your refrigerator. **Don't expose yourself to bright light while you are up.** The light gives cues to your brain that it is time to wake up.
- **Remaining passively awake.** This involves avoiding any effort to fall asleep. Paradoxically, worrying that you can't sleep can actually keep you awake. Letting go of this worry can help you relax and make it easier to fall asleep.

If you continue to have sleeping problems, consider keeping a **sleep diary**. Write down when you go to bed, when you get up, how much time you spend in bed unable to sleep, total sleep time and other details about your sleep patterns.