

# GOOD SLEEP HABITS

## Helpful Hints to Help You Sleep

Poor sleep habits (referred to as sleep hygiene) are among the most common problems encountered in our society. Sleep hygiene includes a variety of different practices that are necessary to have normal, quality nighttime sleep and full daytime alertness. We stay up too late and get up too early. We interrupt our sleep with drugs, chemicals and work, and we overstimulate ourselves with late-night activities such as television, laptops, iPads, etc.

It is important to maintain a regular wake and sleep pattern seven days a week. It is also important to spend an appropriate amount of time in bed, not too little, or too excessive. This may vary by individual; for example, if someone has a problem with daytime sleepiness, they should spend a minimum of eight hours in bed, if they have difficulty sleeping at night, they should limit themselves to 7 hours in bed in order to keep the sleep pattern consolidated.

## Why is it important to practice good sleep hygiene?

Sleep hygiene is important for everyone, from childhood through adulthood. A good sleep hygiene routine promotes healthy sleep and daytime alertness. Good sleep hygiene practices can prevent the development of sleep problems and disorders.

## How does someone know if his or her sleep hygiene is poor?

Sleep disturbances and daytime sleepiness are the most telling signs of poor sleep hygiene. If one is experiencing a sleep problem, he or she should evaluate their sleep routine. It may take some time for the changes to have a positive effect.

## How do I know the best sleep hygiene routine for me?

If you're taking too long to fall asleep, or awakening during the night, you should consider revising your bedtime habits. Most important for everyone is to maintain a regular sleep-wake schedule throughout the week and consider how much time you spend in bed, which could be too much or too little.

Below are some essentials of good sleep habits. 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. Click on any of the links below for more information:

## Your Personal Habits

- **Fix a bedtime and an awakening time.** Do not be one of those people who allows bedtime and

awakening time 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 of good sleeping habits.

- **Avoid napping during the day.** If you nap throughout the day, it is no wonder that you will not be able to sleep at night. Naps can disturb the normal pattern of sleep and wakefulness. 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 stimulants 4-6 hours before bedtime.** Avoid stimulants such as caffeine, nicotine, and alcohol too close to bedtime. This includes caffeinated beverages such as coffee, tea and many sodas, as well as chocolate, so be careful. Remember, chocolate has caffeine. 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.
- **Food can be disruptive right before sleep.** Stay away from large meals close to bedtime. Avoid heavy, spicy, or sugary foods 4-6 hours before bedtime. These can affect your ability to stay asleep. Also dietary changes can cause sleep problems, if someone is struggling with a sleep problem, it's not a good time to start experimenting with spicy dishes.
- **Exercise can promote good sleep.** Exercise regularly, but not right before bed. Regular exercise, particularly in the afternoon, can help deepen sleep. Strenuous exercise within the 2 hours before bedtime, however, can decrease your ability to fall asleep.
- **Ensure adequate exposure to natural light.** This is particularly important for older people who may not venture outside as frequently as children and adults. Light exposure helps maintain a healthy sleep-wake cycle.

## Your Sleeping Environment

- **Use comfortable bedding.** Uncomfortable bedding can prevent good sleep. Evaluate whether or not 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 to sleep.
- **Block out all distracting noise** and eliminate as much light as possible.
- **Reserve the bed for sleep and sex.** Don't use the bed as an office, workroom or recreation room. It's not a good idea to use your bed to watch TV, listen to the radio, or read. Let your body "know" that the bed is associated with sleeping.

### Getting Ready For Bed

- **Avoid stressful, stimulating activities**—doing work, discussing emotional issues. Physically and psychologically stressful activities can cause the body to secrete the stress hormone cortisol, which is associated with increasing alertness. Try to avoid emotionally upsetting conversations and activities before trying to go to sleep. Don't dwell on or bring your problems to bed.
- **Establish a pre-sleep ritual/routine.** Pre-sleep rituals, such as a warm bath or a few minutes of reading, can help you sleep. Ease the transition from wake time to sleep time with a period of relaxing activities before bed. Take a bath (the rise, then fall in body temperature promotes drowsiness), read a book, or practice relaxation exercises.
- **Try a light snack before bed.** Warm milk and foods high in the amino acid tryptophan, such as bananas, may help you to 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 job, school, daily life, etc., 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. You might also try writing them down to get them out of your head, and then put them aside.
- **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 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. Leave the bedroom. Read, have a light snack, do some quiet activity, or take a bath. You will generally find that you can get back to sleep 20 minutes or so later. Do not perform challenging or engaging activity such as office work, housework, etc. Do not watch television.

### A Word About Television

Many people fall asleep with the television on in their room. Watching television before bedtime is often a bad idea. Television is a very engaging medium that tends to keep people up. We generally recommend that the television not be in the bedroom. At the appropriate bedtime, the TV should be turned off and the patient should go to bed. Some people find that the radio helps them go to sleep. Since radio is a less engaging medium than TV, this is probably a good idea.

### 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 sleeping difficulty. 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 healthcare professionals. The goal is to rediscover how to sleep naturally.

### References

<http://sleepfoundation.org/ask-the-expert/sleep-hygiene>  
<http://umm.edu/programs/sleep/patients/sleep-hygiene>