

Do You Get Enough Sleep?

10 Tips to Improve Sleep Habits

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With over 50 percent of Americans claiming they do not get a good night's sleep on a regular basis, insomnia has become a major health and wellness concern[1]. In fact, most people—including children—do not get enough sleep each night. According to University of Michigan clinical psychologist Todd Arnedt, who specializes in treating patients with insomnia, “the most common thing I hear from people is—I'm not able to shut my mind down at night, my mind is running about what I've got to do the next day.” Stress and anxiety about things such as current events, the pandemic, deadlines and pressures at work or taking care of kids can keep you awake at night.



Not only that, our engagement with brightly lit screens at night not only impacts the production of melatonin (the sleep hormone), but our constant anticipation of social media networking, video gaming, and tweets and texts has been shown to rewire the brain for stress. This affects our ability to get a good night's sleep, leading to sleep deprivation, tiredness, and ultimately being less productive the next day.

So, what can we do about it?

10 Ways to Help Improve Sleep Habits

1. **Practice “Digital Balance.”** Instead of being on your phone or watching TV before bed, read a book, meditate or listen to relaxing music instead (anything quiet, sedentary, that helps get your body ready for bed.) The idea is to prepare your body for bed and train your brain and body to know when sleep is coming. Set a time each night where you turn all electronic devices off. Even if it's just 30 minutes before you go to bed, it can help prevent you from checking that email one last time or scrolling through your social media feed. You may even consider designating your bedroom a “tech free” zone!
2. **Limit your caffeine intake.** This doesn't just include coffee and tea—check the caffeine content of any soda and energy beverage that you drink. Some foods such as chocolate, and medications such as some pain relievers, contain caffeine so be careful to read labels if you're looking at cutting down on caffeine. Consider eliminating any caffeine consumption past noon.

3. **Avoid excessive alcohol consumption before bed.** A common misconception is that alcohol helps you fall asleep and stay asleep; however, drinking before bed interrupts your circadian rhythm and blocks REM sleep, inhibiting your quality of sleep overall.
4. **Take an afternoon nap.** Many people are afraid to nap during the day, thinking they won't be able to sleep at night. Naps (about 20 minutes) can help restore "sleep debts" accumulated during sleepless nights and often make it easier to sleep again later.
5. **Increase your daylight exposure.** Melatonin is a naturally occurring hormone controlled by light exposure that helps regulate your sleep-wake cycle. Working in dark spaces during the day can confuse your body. Try to take your work breaks and get your exercise outside in sunlight. If this isn't possible, consider using a light therapy box to increase your exposure.
6. **Decrease your nightlight exposure.** Instead of sitting in front of a brightly lit TV or computer screen, try listening to music or audio books, or reading by lamplight for 2-3 hours before you try to sleep. When it's time to sleep, make sure your room is as dark as possible, or use a sleep mask to cover your eyes.
7. **Exercise vigorously, just not before bedtime.** A sedentary lifestyle is a known risk factor for insomnia, but so is vigorous exercise in the hours just before you want to sleep. The best times to exercise are before work, at lunch, during a break or immediately after work.
8. **Breathe and meditate.** Meditate or practice mindful breathing exercises during the day and then again at bedtime. There are tons of podcasts, apps and other audio options that can guide you through the steps. Start with five or ten minutes each day.

A quick mindfulness exercise: As you fall asleep, focus on your breathing, counting inhales and exhales instead of sheep. If your thoughts wander, bring your attention back to your breathing.

9. **Try a white noise machine.** If the sound of a garbage truck, a dog's bark or a spouse's snoring awakens you or keeps you from getting to sleep, a white noise machine can help. They not only block distracting noises, but also provide soothing sounds that help many people relax and fall to sleep.
10. **Practice good "Sleep Hygiene."** Sleep hygiene refers our typical sleep environment. The bedroom should not have anything in it that tends to interrupt a good night's sleep, including street noise, room temperature, light, televisions, computers, snoring partners, and yes, even pets on your bed! In addition, good sleep hygiene also includes a comfortable mattress and a cool, quiet, dark room[2].

Sleep washes your brain each night so you can have brighter days. Taking assessment of your current sleep habits, and working to improve them, can have a significant positive impact on your well being!