

Getting a Good Night's Sleep

Overview

Ways to fall asleep and stay asleep at home and on the road

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If you have trouble sleeping, you're not alone. More than half of all adults in the U.S. sometimes have difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep. And most people don't get the seven or eight hours of sleep a night that the American Academy of Family Physicians recommends for the average adult.

Even people who usually sleep well may have trouble sleeping when they're under extra stress or away from home. Having a bad night -- or several in a row -- can leave you feeling tired, impatient, and less able to cope. If you have trouble getting to sleep or staying asleep or want to make sure that you're getting enough rest, the following tips can help. Getting enough sleep will help you stay safe, healthy, and productive at home and on the road.

Why it's important to get enough sleep

Most adults need to get at least seven or eight hours of sleep a night on a regular basis to feel rested and energetic. And some people need more than that, especially if they have health conditions. Getting too little sleep, even for a night or two, can leave you feeling exhausted, forgetful, irritable, and more likely to make mistakes. Sleep deprivation is also a major cause of auto accidents. Up to 100,000 car accidents a year may result from sleep deprivation, according to the National Center on Sleep Disorders Research at the National Institutes of Health.

Sleep deprivation can lead to serious health problems. Getting too little sleep may suppress the immune system, making you more likely to develop certain illnesses. It may also affect your body's metabolism, causing you to gain weight more easily. Many experts say that if you can fall asleep in the daytime within 10 minutes of closing your eyes, you need to get more sleep at night. You also may need more sleep if you don't have the energy you need for your everyday tasks.

Tips on falling asleep and staying asleep

You can take many steps to fall asleep and stay asleep.

- *Have a bedtime routine.* A regular bedtime ritual will help to train your mind to relax and fall asleep in response to physical and emotional triggers, or the events of your routine. You may need to try several routines to find the one that is best

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for you – taking a warm bath, listening to soft music, having a snack, reading a few pages of a book or magazine in your favorite easy chair.

- *Try to go to bed and get up at the same time every day*, even when you don't have to go to work. A predictable schedule will help you make a habit of sleeping and waking at certain times. If you live with other people, this will also remind them that they need to reduce their noise or activity at certain times. Some families have a final “lights out” time for everybody in the household.
- *Get regular exercise, but not during the three hours before bedtime*. Daily exercise can help you get to sleep faster and sleep better, but exercise too near bedtime can keep you awake.
- *Save your bed for sleeping*. Avoid doing work or using a computer in bed. Reserving your bed for sleep will help to maintain a link in your mind between the bed and sleeping.
- *Avoid or limit nicotine, caffeine, and alcohol before bedtime*. Nicotine and caffeine (in coffee, tea, soft drinks, and medications) are stimulants that can make it harder to sleep. The effects of a cup of coffee last three to four hours for most people, and longer for others. Check the ingredients in any over-the-counter painkillers, too. Some painkillers contain as much as 130 milligrams of caffeine in a two-tablet dose. (A cup of coffee contains 85 milligrams.) Ask your doctor to recommend an alternative if you're having trouble sleeping. Having a drink before bed can make you wake up later in the night.
- *Eat your evening meal at least two hours before you go to bed*. Eating a late meal can create high levels of stomach acid that keep you awake.
- *Deal with troubling tasks earlier in the day or evening*. It may be harder to get to sleep if you pay bills, try to solve an office problem, or talk to a child about a discipline just before bed. If you have children who do homework, think about doing paperwork at a quiet family “homework time” earlier in the evening.
- *Avoid overstimulating television, radio, and computer activities just before bed*. If you watch television to unwind, remember that some programs -- such as news reports or crime shows -- can make it hard to fall asleep. Try tuning into the news on the way home from work or early in the evening. If you use the Internet, set a last check-in time for early in the evening, too.
- *Keep your bedroom quiet, dark, and comfortable*. Adjust the room to suit your sleeping needs. Even passing car headlights can trouble your sleep. Keep shades pulled down and blinds or curtains closed. If the room is still too light, consider getting blackout curtains or using an eye mask. You may also want to use earplugs or a “white noise” machine to mask or block out some sounds, especially if you don't need to hear an alarm clock in the morning.

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- *Avoid using a night light.* If you or other family members need light to help with bathroom trips in the night, keep a nightlight on in the hall, but not in your bedroom.
- *Sleep on a comfortable bed.* Tuck in your sheets and blankets, so you'll be less likely to wake up cold or tangled in your bed linens. If you share a bedroom with someone who likes the room colder or warmer than you do, keep an extra blanket handy at the foot of the bed.
- *Choose your mattress and pillow carefully.* Talk to your doctor about what kind of support you need if you have arthritis, neck or back problems, allergies, or other health concerns. A recent study found that most people with back problems preferred a medium-firm mattress. If you sleep especially well at a particular hotel or relative's home, find out about the mattress and bed you slept on. Your doctor may also be able to suggest ways to deal with "restless leg" syndrome, which may respond to vitamins or minerals.
- *Limit daytime naps.* If you've had too little sleep, a nap may restore your energy and focus. Even 15 minutes of sleep can take the edge off tiredness. But keep in mind that napping for more than 45 minutes may do more harm than good. After 45 minutes, you are likely to enter into a deep sleep that will leave you feeling sleepy when you wake up. A nap of more than 45 minutes can make it harder for you to get to sleep later on at night.
- *Visit helpful Web sites.* You can learn about prescription and over-the-counter sleep medications by visiting the site for the U.S. Food and Drug Administration at www.fda.gov. You'll find other helpful information on the site for the National Center on Sleep Disorders Research; go to www.nhlbi.nih.gov/about/ncsdr and click on the "Patient and Public Information" pages.

If you can't fall asleep or stay asleep

Lying in bed awake can add to your stress and make it harder to fall asleep. If you can't get to sleep within 20 or 30 minutes of going to bed, or if you wake in the night and can't get back to sleep, get up and do something relaxing. You might:

- *Read something light or listen to soothing music in another room.* To avoid overstimulation, keep the lights low.
- *Drink a cup of warm milk.* Milk contains an amino acid that may help you get to sleep. And the ritual of heating the milk and drinking it slowly in a dimly lit room can help you feel relaxed and sleepy.
- *Write it down.* If something stressful is keeping you awake, try writing it down. Some people find that it helps to describe how they feel or to make a list of the things that they need to do or that are on their mind.
- *Do deep-breathing or other relaxation exercises.* Inhale as you count to five slowly, and exhale as you reverse the count. Some people find it helpful to relax each part

of their body in succession, starting with the right foot, right leg, right shoulder, right hand, and so on, back down the left side.

Sleeping well when you travel

When you travel you may get “jet lag,” a feeling of fatigue or disorientation that results from crossing time zones. Jet lag can make it harder to fall asleep even if you’re exhausted. If you’ve had this problem, you may want to take extra steps that can help you sleep better during and after trips.

- *Plan ahead for plane trips.* If you may need to sleep on a flight, take a few things that might help, such as an eye mask, ear plugs, a comfortable neck pillow, or a “white noise” recording to block out cabin noise.
- *Look for hotel and motel rooms that will help you sleep.* Find out if a hotel or motel faces a busy street or highway and, if so, ask for a room on the back of the building, which is usually quieter. Request a room away from a noisy elevator or vending machine. And if strong sunlight may interfere with your ability to sleep, ask if a hotel or motel has blackout curtains. Some hotels have these in some rooms even if they don’t have them in all of them.
- *Return home on a Friday night or on Saturday if possible.* Coming home early in the weekend will let you catch up on your sleep before you go back to work.
- *Talk to your health care provider if you suffer from frequent jet lag.* Let your doctor know if jet lag often interferes with your ability to sleep when you travel. Your physician may recommend a prescription or an over-the-counter medication that may make it easier to adjust to jet lag.

If you still have trouble sleeping

Many sleep problems are temporary and go away on their own. Others result from physical or emotional health conditions that require medical help. Some people have a serious condition called sleep apnea, which may have symptoms such as snoring and breathing difficulties that interrupt sleep. If this occurs, your doctor may refer you to a sleep disorders clinic that specializes in your condition. Other problems may be caused by emotional concerns such as depression and anxiety that a therapist or other counselor can help you identify.

Only a trained professional can identify the cause of some sleeping difficulties. So it’s important to talk to your health care provider if you have sleeping problems that last longer than a week. A doctor can help you identify and treat the problem so you can get the rest you need to do your best every day.

Written with the help of Deborah Borchers, M.D.