

Help yourself to a Good Night's Sleep



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To Get The Best Results From Your Sleep Period, Follow These Simple Rules:

1) Get up at the same time every morning

Regardless of how your night passes or when you went to bed, getting up at the same time everyday is the most important rule for good sleep performance. The internal “clock” which regulates your sleep-wake cycle is synchronized by a number of factors. The most powerful time-giver for this “clock” is the time you get up in the morning and not the amount of sleep you get nor the time you go to bed. If you sleep in, you will reset your internal clock to later sleep and wake times which may turn one poor night of sleep into the first of many. Ignoring this rule is the most common cause of “Sunday night insomnia”. Here, you may sleep in on Saturday morning and go to bed later than usual that night. On Sunday morning you get up late again but go to bed at the time you would normally retire on a weekday. However, your “clock” has reset the sleep time to be the same as on Saturday night (say, 1:00 p.m.) and sleep is usually delayed until that time.

2) Go to bed only when you feel sleepy

Time spent in bed while wide awake fosters increased mental activity and anxiety about getting to sleep. This can be a destructive association. Read or do something relaxing until you feel sleepy. This activity should be done away from the bedroom and the bed. Insomniacs usually, and unconsciously, associate bed with sleeplessness rather than sleep. Spending long times in bed reading or returning to bed in the morning to “rest” reinforce this association. Using the bed and bedroom only for sleep, changes this negative association so that sleep is more likely to come when you “hit the pillow”.

3) Give yourself only 20 minutes to fall asleep

If you have not fallen asleep then get up and leave the bedroom to do something relaxing or slightly monotonous. When you feel sleepy go back to bed. This rule applies to awakenings during the night as well; if it seems that you have been awake for longer than 20 minutes then get up and do something quiet and relaxing. This “20 minute rule” should be done by guess work. Focussing on time is another arousing activity (“I have only two hours to get some sleep”) and promote wakefulness rather than sleepiness. If you use an alarm, turn the clock face away from you and leave your watch out of sight.

4) Avoid naps

The best sleep is obtained at night. Napping disrupts your daily rhythm, confuses your internal “clock” and decreases both the quality and quantity of the following night's sleep. Although some people and cultures regularly nap they usually do this by decreasing the time spent sleeping at night. If you tend to be a poor sleeper, don't nap during the day.

5) Have a cool, quiet, dark bedroom

The ideal temperature seems to be 64-66°F or 18°C. Noise and light can disturb sleep even if they don't cause awakenings. If your sleep environment is not sound and light proof, earplugs and eye shades can be helpful.

6) Keep regular rituals and routines before bedtime

At home, or away, the familiar acts of brushing your teeth, washing your face, setting the alarm, meditation, etc. all reinforce sleepiness.

7) Avoid caffeine, alcohol and tobacco in the evening

These are stimulants (i.e. promote wakefulness), increase the rate of urine production and are addictive drugs that delay sleep onset, disrupt sleep stages, and cause arousals and awakenings. A shot of alcohol may make you drowsy but the resulting sleep is fragmented and unrefreshing.

8) Exercise moderately in the late afternoon or early evening

An early evening walk is an excellent way to wind down and get exercise. If you exercise regularly (40 minutes or more of aerobic exercise, three times per week or more) you have more “deep” sleep than people who do not exercise. Strenuous exercise late in the day (i.e. after 20:00 hours) overstimulates your nervous system making it difficult to wind down by bedtime. Morning exercise is good for fitness but has little direct effect on sleep. Swimming, whirlpool or sauna sessions are especially healthy and relaxing.

9) Have a light snack perhaps with warm milk in the evening

Feeling either too full or hungry delays sleep onset. Tryptophan, a naturally occurring amino acid, promotes sleep but has to be taken in large quantities. Although milk contains tryptophan, it does not contain sufficient tryptophan to act as a sleep promoting compound. However, regularly relaxing with a warm glass of milk before retiring can be a helpful routine that becomes a sleep promoting association or behaviour.

10) Don't oversleep

Slightly curtailing sleep time solidifies sleep. If you are troubled by occasional sleep difficulty it is better to shorten your sleep period by 15 minutes for the next few nights rather than to oversleep.

11) Unwind long before bedtime

Take time earlier in the day to collect your thoughts, mull over events, plan or problem solve. Leave your day's dilemmas at the bedroom door.

12) Save your bedroom for sex and sleep

This room should be associated with pleasure, relaxation and sleep. Work projects, studying, eating, budgeting, arguing, disciplining, working out and watching TV are best done elsewhere.

13) Avoid using sleeping pills regularly

They are to be used sparingly, in specific situations and on the recommendation of your doctor. Borrowing sleeping pills that are not prescribed for you is never a good idea. Sleep promoting medicines that can be bought without a prescription are not a good idea as you can become dependent on them and they rapidly lose their effectiveness with continuous use. All medications have side effects and risks associated with their use. The risks of regular hypnotic use are morning grogginess, abnormal sleep, dependency, expense, eventual reduced effectiveness and they also significantly interact with alcohol and other medications. There are many treatments that do not use medications to help you sleep more soundly and these should be tried first.

Myths And Facts About Sleep

Myth: Everyone needs eight hours of sleep a night.

Fact: Different people need different amounts of nightly sleep. For some adults, four to six hours a night are enough; others need eight hours or more. Age also affects sleep requirements. Infants generally sleep 16 hours a day, but sleep requirements lessen with the years and by age five, a child usually sleeps about 11 hours a day. By late adolescence, most people arrive at their adult level of seven or eight hours a night. Those over 50 generally report they sleep less than when they were younger.

Myth: There is no way you can make up for lost sleep.

Fact: In research experiments, individuals who have stayed awake for three to ten days have been able to “catch up” (that is obtain sufficient sleep to feel rested and refreshed during the day) by sleeping only 11 to 16 hours. Although they “lost” 24 hours of sleep, they “caught up” even though they had a “sleep debt” of between 8 and 13 hours. Sleep is not really “gained” or “lost” but is part of a rhythm that is either disrupted or resumed. Counting hours of sleep per night is only half the story as sleep is not a single process but involves a number of stages. After sleep loss, the body compensates by proportionally increasing the amount of “deep” sleep and, in this way, the “sleep debt” is quickly restored. Experiments have clearly shown that by keeping a regular schedule (e.g. going to bed and getting up at the same time every day) the body adapts faster to acute or chronic sleep loss.

Myth: Counting sheep offers no help in falling asleep.

Fact: This traditional remedy isn't sure-fire but it's certainly worth a try. Any relaxing thoughts, requiring little effort and concentration, may help you ease your mind, and relieve the tension that causes much sleeplessness. Simply repeating a nonsense phrase or saying “one” to yourself repeatedly, induces a relaxation response which promotes sleep. These techniques are particularly helpful if your mind is overly focussed on worries about tomorrow or on about how much sleep you “must” get. These sort of thoughts result in mental and physical arousal which delays the onset of sleep.

References

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