

Twelve Tips for Restful Slumber

Falling asleep may seem like an impossible dream when you're awake at 3 a.m. but good sleep is more under your control than you might think. Following healthy sleep habits can make the difference between restlessness and restful slumber. Researchers have identified a variety of practices and habits,—known as “sleep hygiene”—which can help anyone maximize the hours they spend sleeping, even those whose sleep is affected by insomnia, jet lag, or shift work.

1. Avoid Caffeine, Alcohol, Nicotine, and Other Chemicals that Interfere with Sleep

As any coffee lover knows, caffeine is a stimulant that can keep you awake. So, avoid caffeine (found in coffee, tea, chocolate, cola, and some pain relievers) for four to six hours before bedtime. Similarly, smokers should refrain from using tobacco products too close to bedtime.

Although alcohol may help bring on sleep, after a few hours it acts as a stimulant, increasing the number of awakenings and generally decreasing the quality of sleep later in the night. It is therefore best to limit alcohol consumption, and to avoid drinking within three hours of bedtime.

2. Turn Your Bedroom into a Sleep-inducing Environment

A quiet, dark, and cool environment can help promote sound slumber. Why do you think bats congregate in caves for their daytime sleep? To achieve such an environment, lower the volume of outside noise with earplugs or a “white noise” appliance. Use heavy curtains, blackout shades or an eye mask to block light, a powerful cue that tells the brain that it's time to wake up. Keep the temperature comfortably cool—between 60 and 75 degrees Fahrenheit—and the room well ventilated. And make sure your bedroom is equipped with a comfortable mattress and pillows. Most mattresses wear out after ten years.

Also, if a pet regularly wakes you during the night, you may want to consider keeping it out of your bedroom.

It may help to limit your bedroom activities to sleep and sex only. Keeping computers, TVs and work materials out will limit distractions and light, as well as potentially strengthening the association between your bedroom and sleep.

3. Establish a Soothing Pre-sleep Routine

Ease the transition from wake time to sleep time with a period of relaxing activities an hour or so before bed. Take a bath (the rise, then fall in body temperature promotes drowsiness), read a book, watch television or practice relaxation exercises. 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. If you tend to take your problems to bed, try writing them down—and then putting them aside.

4. Go to Sleep When You're Truly Tired

Struggling to fall sleep just leads to frustration. If you're not asleep after 20 minutes, get out of bed, go to another room and do something relaxing, like reading or listening to music until you are tired enough to sleep.

5. Don't Be a Nighttime Clock-watcher

Staring at a clock in your bedroom, either when you are trying to fall asleep or when you wake in the middle of the night, can actually increase stress, making it harder to fall asleep. Turn your clock's face away from you.

And if you wake up in the middle of the night and can't get back to sleep in about 20 minutes, get up and engage in a quiet, restful activity such as reading or listening to music. And keep the lights dim; bright light can stimulate your internal clock. When your eyelids are drooping and you are ready to sleep, return to bed.

6. Use Light to Your Advantage

Natural light keeps your internal clock on a healthy sleep-wake cycle. So let in the light first thing in the morning and get out of the office for a sun break during the day.

7. Keep Your Internal Clock Set with a Consistent Sleep Schedule

Going to bed and waking up the same time each day sets the body's "internal clock" to expect sleep at a certain time night after night. Try to stick as close as possible to your routine on weekends to avoid a Monday morning sleep hangover. Waking up at the same time each day is the very best way to set your clock, and even if you did not sleep well the night before then the extra sleep drive will help you consolidate sleep the following night.

8. Nap Early—Or Not at All

Many people make naps a regular part of their day. However, for those who find falling asleep or staying asleep through the night problematic, afternoon napping may be one of the culprits. This is because late-day naps decrease sleep drive. If you must nap, it's better to keep it short and before 3 p.m.

9. Lighten-up on Evening Meals

Eating a pepperoni pizza at 10 p.m. may be a recipe for insomnia. Finish dinner several hours before bedtime and avoid foods that cause indigestion. If you get hungry at night, snack on foods that in your experience won't disturb your sleep, perhaps dairy foods and carbohydrates.

10. Balance Fluid Intake

Drink enough fluid at night to keep from waking up thirsty but not so much and not so close to bedtime that you will be awakened by the need for a trip to the bathroom.

11. Exercise Early

Exercise can help you fall asleep faster and sleep more soundly—as long as it is done at the right time. Exercise stimulates the body to secrete the stress hormone cortisol, which helps activate the alerting mechanism in the brain. This is fine unless you're trying to fall asleep. Try to finish exercising at least three hours before bed or work out earlier in the day.

12. Follow Through

Remember, some of these tips will be easier to make part of your daily and nightly routine than others, but if you stick with them your chances of achieving restful sleep will improve. That said, not all sleep problems are so easily treated and this could signify a sleep disorder such as apnea, restless legs syndrome, narcolepsy, and many others. If your sleep difficulties don't improve through good sleep hygiene, consult a medical provider.