

Sleep Tips

How much should I sleep?

At certain points in our lives, our sleep will be disrupted and this will change the amount we need. For instance, if we've been deprived of sleep for some time, we'll have a period of 'catching up' before our sleep resumes its normal pattern.

Students commonly skimp on sleep during busy periods, like preparing for exams. However, sleeping less while trying to cram means that your body and brain are deprived of essential rest. Your concentration will decrease and memory will be impaired, making it more likely that your academic performance will decline.

Tips for Better Sleep

If you're having trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, waking early and/or feeling sleepy during the day, try these tips:

- Organise your bedroom to control light, temperature and noise.
 - Maintain a comfortable temperature in the bedroom. Extreme temperatures may disrupt sleep or prevent you from falling asleep.
 - Ensure your bedroom is dark enough to sleep, but allows some natural light so your body clock can set itself with night and day. When possible, wake up with the sun, or use very bright lights in the morning. Sleep experts recommend exposure to an hour of morning sunlight for people having problems falling asleep.
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Get 30 minutes of solid exercise a day

Being physically tired will help induce sleep. Try to get your exercise at least 5 to 6 hours before going to bed. Avoid exercising within two hours of bedtime as this can energise you and keep you awake.

Cut out caffeine, alcohol and tobacco

Avoid all of these things at least 6 to 8 hours before sleeping if you want a good night's sleep.

Caffeine acts as a stimulant and can take up to eight hours to wear off. Sources of caffeine include coffee, chocolate, soft drinks, non-herbal teas, diet drugs, and some pain relievers.

Alcohol may initially help you fall asleep, but it also causes disturbances in sleep resulting in less restful sleep. It tends to rob people of deep sleep and REM sleep and keeps them in the lighter stages of sleep. An alcoholic drink before bedtime may also make it more likely that you'll wake up during the night.

Having a smoke before bed feels relaxing, but actually puts a stimulant into your bloodstream. The effects of nicotine are similar to those of caffeine. Smokers tend to sleep very lightly and often wake up in the early morning due to nicotine withdrawal. Nicotine can keep you up and awaken you at night. It should be avoided particularly near bedtime.

Avoid napping

Napping can only make matters worse if you usually have problems falling asleep. If you do nap, keep it short (15 to 20 minutes) and not within 8 hours of bedtime.

Quarantine your bed

Make sure your bed is for sleep only. Don't use your bed for studying, thinking, watching TV, eating or discussing emotional issues. Otherwise, bed can end up being associated with distracting activities that could make it difficult for you to fall asleep. Going to bed with the television or radio on could result in you needing the TV or radio on every time you try and sleep.

Eat right, sleep tight

Try not to go to bed hungry, but avoid heavy meals before bedtime. Milk contains tryptophan, which is a sleep-promoting substance.

Other foods that may help promote sleep include tuna, pumpkin, artichokes, avocados, almonds, eggs, bok choy, peaches, walnuts, apricots, oats, asparagus, potatoes, buckwheat and bananas.

Establish a bedtime ritual

Stress not only makes you miserable, it wreaks havoc on your sleep. Develop some kind of pre-sleep ritual to break the connection between all the day's stress and bedtime. These rituals can be as short as 10 minutes or as long as an hour. You can train yourself to associate certain restful activities with sleep and make them part of your bedtime ritual.

Combining this with a period of relaxation perhaps by reading something light, or meditating, can also help you get better sleep.

Go to sleep and get up at the same time, even if you haven't had consistent sleep. Set a schedule and keep it. 'Sleeping in' on weekends also makes it harder to wake up early on Monday morning because it re-sets your sleep cycles for a later awakening.

Be persistent, but patient

Don't become stressed about not sleeping! Feeling frustrated about a lack of sleep won't make it happen faster. Instead, focus on calming yourself and relaxing your body. Getting into the 'habit' of sleeping properly can take a while, so don't be disheartened.

If you have trouble falling asleep night after night, or if you always feel tired the next day, then you may have a sleep disorder and should see your doctor.

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