

How to Sleep Better

Simple Steps to Getting a Good Night's Sleep



Sleeping well directly affects your mental and physical health and the quality of your waking life. Fall short and it can take a serious toll on your daytime energy, productivity, emotional balance, and even your weight. Yet many of us regularly toss and turn at night, struggling to get the sleep we need. There is a solution. Making simple but important changes to your daytime routine and bedtime habits can have a profound impact on how well you sleep, leaving you feeling mentally sharp, emotionally balanced, and full of energy all day long.

How can I get a better night's sleep?

Getting a good night's sleep may seem like an impossible goal when you're wide awake at 3 a.m., but you have much more control over the quality of your sleep than you probably realize. Just as the way you feel during your waking hours often hinges on how well you sleep at night, so the cure for sleep difficulties can often be found in your daily routine.

Unhealthy daytime habits and lifestyle choices can leave you tossing and turning at night and adversely affect your mood, brain and heart health, immune system, creativity, vitality, and weight. But by experimenting with the following tips, you can enjoy better sleep at night, improve your mental and physical health, and improve how you think and feel during the day.

Tip 1: Keep in sync with your body's natural sleep-wake cycle

Getting in sync with your body's [natural sleep-wake cycle, or circadian rhythm](#), is one of the most important strategies for sleeping better. If you keep a regular sleep-wake schedule, you'll feel much more refreshed and energized than if you sleep the same number of hours

at different times, even if you only alter your sleep schedule by an hour or two.

Try to go to sleep and get up at the same time every day. This helps set your body's internal clock and optimize the quality of your sleep. Choose a bed time when you normally feel tired, so that you don't toss and turn. If you're getting enough sleep, you should wake up naturally without an alarm. If you need an alarm clock, you may need an earlier bedtime.

Avoid sleeping in—even on weekends. The more your weekend/weekday sleep schedules differ, the worse the jetlag-like symptoms you'll experience. If you need to make up for a late night, opt for a daytime nap rather than sleeping in. This allows you to pay off your sleep debt without disturbing your natural sleep-wake rhythm.

Be smart about napping. While napping is a good way to make up for lost sleep, if you have trouble falling asleep or staying asleep at night, napping can make things worse. Limit naps to 15 to 20 minutes in the early afternoon.

Fight after-dinner drowsiness. If you get sleepy way before your bedtime, get off the couch and do something mildly stimulating, such as washing the dishes, calling a friend, or getting clothes ready for the next day. If you give in to the drowsiness, you may wake up later in the night and have trouble getting back to sleep.

Tip 2: Control your exposure to light

Melatonin is a naturally occurring hormone controlled by light exposure that helps regulate your sleep-wake cycle. Your brain secretes more melatonin when it's dark—making you sleepy—and less when it's light—making you more alert. However, many aspects of modern life can alter your body's production of melatonin and shift your circadian rhythm.

How to influence your exposure to light

During the day:

Expose yourself to bright sunlight in the morning. The closer to the time you get up, the better. Have your coffee outside, for example, or eat breakfast by a sunny window. The light on your face will help you wake up

Spend more time outside during daylight. Take your work breaks outside in sunlight, exercise outside, or walk your dog during the day instead of at night.

Let as much natural light into your home or workspace as possible. Keep curtains and blinds open during the day, and try to move your desk closer to the window.

If necessary, use a light therapy box. This simulates sunshine and can be especially

useful during short winter days.

At night:

Avoid bright screens within 1-2 hours of your bedtime. The blue light emitted by your phone, tablet, computer, or TV is especially disruptive. You can minimize the impact by using devices with smaller screens, turning the brightness down, or using light-altering software such as f.lux.

Say no to late-night television. Not only does the light from a TV suppress melatonin, but many programs are stimulating rather than relaxing. Try listening to music or audio books instead.

Don't read with backlit devices. Tablets that are backlit are more disruptive than e-readers that don't have their own light source.

When it's time to sleep, make sure the room is dark. Use heavy curtains or shades to block light from windows, or try a sleep mask. Also consider covering up electronics that emit light.

Keep the lights down if you get up during the night. If you need some light to move around safely, try installing a dim nightlight in the hall or bathroom or using a small flashlight. This will make it easier for you to fall back to sleep.

Tip 3: Exercise during the day

People who exercise regularly sleep better at night and feel less sleepy during the day. Regular exercise also improves the symptoms of insomnia and sleep apnea and increases the amount of time you spend in the deep, restorative stages of sleep.

- The more vigorously you exercise, the more powerful the sleep benefits. But even light exercise—such as walking for just 10 minutes a day—improves sleep quality.
- It can take several months of regular activity before you experience the full sleep-promoting effects. So be patient and focus on [building an exercise habit that sticks](#).

For better sleep, time your exercise right

Exercise speeds up your metabolism, elevates body temperature, and stimulates hormones such as cortisol. This isn't a problem if you're exercising in the morning or afternoon, but too close to bed and it can interfere with sleep.

Try to finish moderate to vigorous workouts at least three hours before bedtime. If you're still experiencing sleep difficulties, move your workouts even earlier. Relaxing, low-impact

exercises such as yoga or gentle stretching in the evening can help promote sleep.

Tip 4: Be smart about what you eat and drink

Your daytime eating habits play a role in how well you sleep, especially in the hours before bedtime.

Limit caffeine and nicotine. You might be surprised to know that caffeine can cause sleep problems up to ten to twelve hours after drinking it! Similarly, [smoking](#) is another stimulant that can disrupt your sleep, especially if you smoke close to bedtime.

Avoid big meals at night. Try to make dinnertime earlier in the evening, and avoid heavy, rich foods within two hours of bed. Spicy or acidic foods can cause stomach trouble and heartburn.

Avoid alcohol before bed. While a nightcap may help you relax, it interferes with your sleep cycle once you're out.

Avoid drinking too many liquids in the evening. Drinking lots of fluids may result in frequent bathroom trips throughout the night.

Cut back on sugary foods and refined carbs. Eating lots of [sugar and refined carbs](#) such as white bread, white rice, and pasta during the day can trigger wakefulness at night and pull you out of the deep, restorative stages of sleep.

Nighttime snacks help you sleep

For some people, a light snack before bed can help promote sleep. For others, eating before bed leads to indigestion and make sleeping more difficult. If you need a bedtime snack, try:

- Half of a turkey sandwich
- A small bowl of whole-grain, low-sugar cereal
- Milk or yogurt
- A banana

Tip 5: Wind down and clear your head

Do you find yourself unable to sleep or waking up night after night? Residual stress, worry, and anger from your day can make it very difficult to sleep well.

- If anxiety or chronic worrying dominates your thoughts at night, there are steps you

can take to

[learn how to stop worrying](#) and look at life from a more positive perspective. Even counting sheep is more productive than worrying at bedtime.

- If the stress of work, family, or school is keeping you awake, you may need help with [stress management](#). By learning how to manage your time effectively, handle stress in a productive way, and maintain a calm, positive outlook, you'll be able to sleep better at night.
- The more overstimulated your brain becomes during the day, the harder it can be slow down and unwind at night. During the day, many of us overstress our brains by constantly interrupting tasks to check our phones, emails, or social media. Try to set aside specific times for these things, and focus on one task at a time. When it comes to getting to sleep at night, your brain won't be accustomed to seeking fresh stimulation and you'll be better able to unwind.

Relaxation techniques for better sleep

Practicing [relaxation techniques](#) before bed is a great way to wind down, calm the mind, and prepare for sleep. Try:

Deep breathing. Close your eyes and take deep, slow breaths, making each breath even deeper than the last.

Progressive muscle relaxation. Starting with your toes, tense all the muscles as tightly as you can, then completely relax. Work your way up to the top of your head.

Visualizing a peaceful, restful place. Close your eyes and imagine a place that's calming and peaceful. Concentrate on how relaxed this place makes you feel.

Bedtime rituals to help you relax

Create a "toolbox" of relaxing bedtime rituals to help you unwind before sleep. For example:

- Read a book or magazine by a soft light
- Take a warm bath
- Listen to soft music
- Do some easy stretches
- Wind down with a favorite hobby
- Listen to books on tape
- Make simple preparations for the next day
- Dim the lights in the hours leading up to bed

Tip 6: Improve your sleep environment

A peaceful bedtime routine sends a powerful signal to your brain that it's time to wind down and let go of the day's stresses. Sometimes even small changes to your environment can make a big difference to your quality of sleep.

Keep your room dark, cool, and quiet

Keep noise down. If you can't avoid or eliminate noise from neighbors, traffic, or other people in your household, try masking it with a fan or sound machine. Earplugs may also help.

Keep your room cool. Most people sleep best in a slightly cool room (around 65° F or 18° C) with adequate ventilation. A bedroom that is too hot or too cold can interfere with quality sleep.

Make sure your bed is comfortable. Your bed covers should leave you enough room to stretch and turn comfortably without becoming tangled. If you often wake up with a sore back or an aching neck, you may need to experiment with different levels of mattress firmness, foam toppers, and pillows that provide more or less support.

Reserve your bed for sleeping and sex. By not working, watching TV, or using your computer in bed, your brain will associate the bedroom with just sleep and sex, which makes it easier to wind down at night.

Tip 7: Learn ways to get back to sleep

It's normal to wake briefly during the night but if you're having [trouble falling back asleep](#), these tips may help:

Stay out of your head. Hard as it may be, try not to stress over your inability to fall asleep again, because that stress only encourages your body to stay awake. To stay out of your head, focus on the feelings in your body or practice breathing exercises. Take a breath in, then breathe out slowly while saying or thinking the word, "Ahhh." Take another breath and repeat.

Make relaxation your goal, not sleep. If you find it hard to fall back asleep, try a relaxation technique such as visualization, progressive muscle relaxation, or meditation, which can be done without even getting out of bed. Even though it's not a replacement for sleep, relaxation can still help rejuvenate your body.

Do a quiet, non-stimulating activity. If you've been awake for more than 15 minutes, get

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out of bed and do a quiet, non-stimulating activity, such as reading a book. Keep the lights dim and avoid screens so as not to cue your body that it's time to wake up.

Postpone worrying and brainstorming. If you wake during the night feeling anxious about something, make a brief note of it on paper and postpone worrying about it until the next day when it will be easier to resolve. Similarly, if a great idea is keeping you awake, make a note of it on paper and fall back to sleep knowing you'll be much more productive after a good night's rest.

Recommended reading

[Improving Sleep](#) - A guide to a good night's rest. (Harvard Medical School Special Health Report)

[Healthy Sleep Tips](#) - Including ideal room temperature, noise, and light control. (National Sleep Foundation)

[Twelve Simple Tips to Improve Your Sleep](#) - Simple tips for making the sleep of your dreams a nightly reality. (Healthy Sleep, Harvard Medical School)

[5 Foods that Help You Sleep](#) - Food relates directly to serotonin, a key hormone that helps promote healthy sleep. (Cleveland Clinic)

[Adopt Good Sleep Habits](#) - How improving your sleep environment and sticking to a regular schedule can improve the quality of your sleep. (Get Sleep, Harvard Medical School Division of Sleep Medicine)

[Stress Less, Sleep More](#) - Tips for reducing stress to promote better sleep, including the use of acupressure. (UCLA)

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